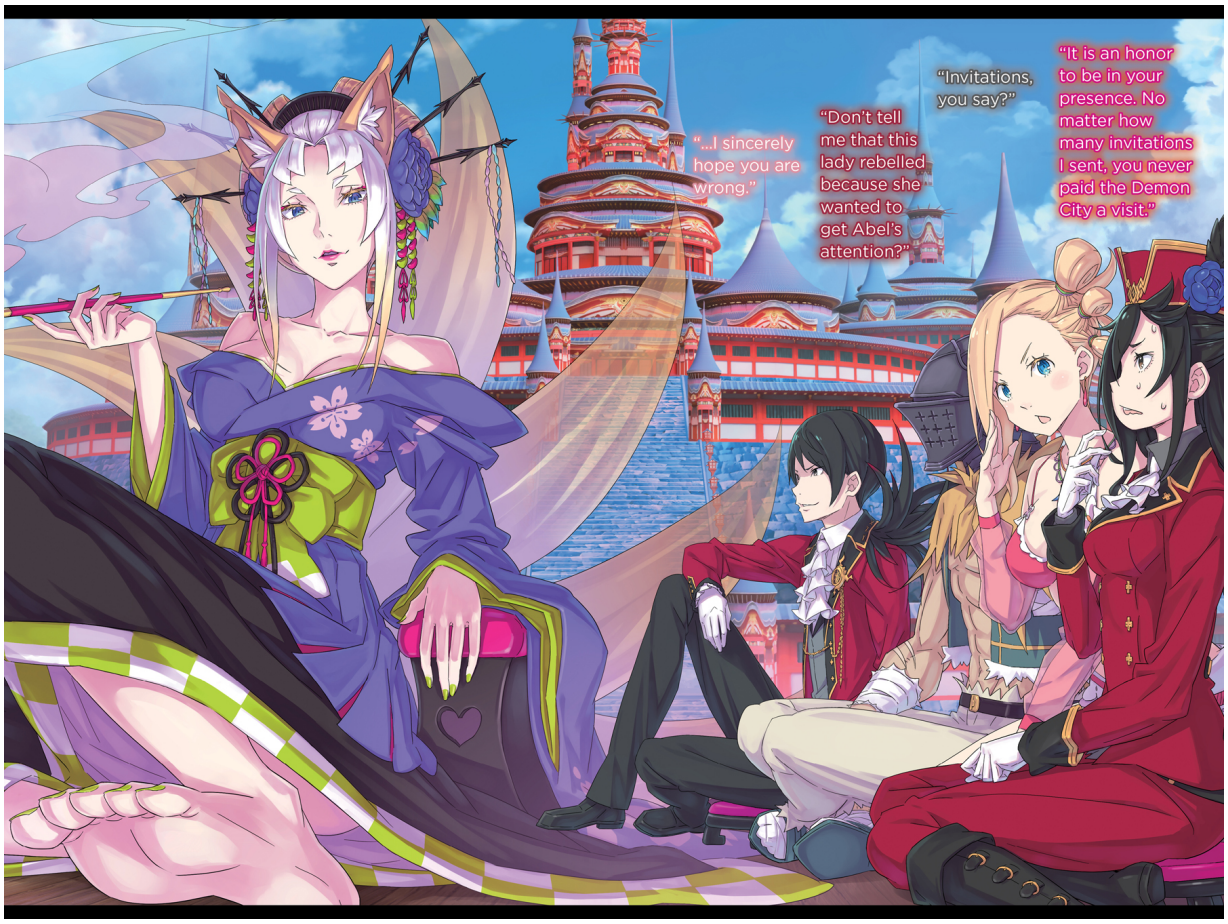
TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
28
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

"Securing the Nine Divine Generals."
"A prerequisite...?"
"There is a means to allay your concerns. In fact, it is a prerequisite for me to do what must be done."

"You there.
What is your name?"
"Eh?"
"Your name. Did you lose your sense of self and your name at the same time? I believe I've heard otherwise. If I recall, it was..."
"My name is Rem."


"...I sincerely hope you are wrong."
"Don't tell me that this lady rebelled because she wanted to get Abel's attention?"
"Invitations, you say?"
"It is an honor to be in your presence. No matter how many invitations I sent, you never paid the Demon City a visit."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1
A Reunion like a Boiling Pool of Blood

Interlude
Haves and Have-Nots

Chapter 2
Self-Proclaimed Hero Subaru Natsuki

Chapter 3
The Path That Must Be Taken

Chapter 4
The Chaotic Demon City

Chapter 5
A Reward Eight Years in the Making

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 28

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Chapter 1: A Reunion Like a Boiling Pool of Blood
Interlude: Haves and Have-Nots
Chapter 2: Self-Proclaimed Hero Subaru Natsuki
Chapter 3: The Path that Must Be Taken
Chapter 4: The Chaotic Demon City
Chapter 5: A Reward Eight Years in the Making

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

CHAPTER 1

A REUNION LIKE A BOILING POOL OF BLOOD

1

She was a crimson woman—a vibrant, blazing crimson so deep, it evoked the scent of blood.

On the top floor of Guaral's city hall, a space so abruptly transformed into a shattered battlefield, no one could tear their attention away from the violent beauty wielding a gleaming red sword.

With dazzling orange hair, an extravagant dress the color of blood, and an imposing blade, the alluring woman seemed larger than life, even from behind.

Speechless, arms still spread wide, Subaru reeled with confusion as he stared at her back.

Countless questions flooded his head.

"What an inane expression, commoner. Were your eyes seared by my nobility?"

"—*Gh!* Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

"Fool. Does it look as though I possess such an odd form? Besides, reading a commoner's mind is no more difficult than breathing."

With just that one comment, Priscilla Bariel brought Subaru back to his senses.

She was the very manifestation of sheer arrogance. And since she was one of the candidates in the royal selection of Lugunica, Subaru was absolutely sure she had no business

being in Volakia.

“Now, then.”

There was no room for questions, however. Priscilla’s red eyes swept the room as she surveyed the scene with contempt.

The top floor of the building was shattered. The Shudrak and General Zikr were visibly wounded and not moving. The only ones still conscious were Subaru, Rem, who stood behind him, and Abel, who was on the balcony…and of course, the one who had caused it all.

“Arakiya.”

Priscilla’s gaze stopped on the silver-haired, half-beast woman.

The young girl, said to be the second-strongest person in all of Volakia, had certainly shown a glimpse of the strength that backed her reputation. Her red right eye, the one not concealed by an eye patch, focused on Priscilla.

It was a clash of overwhelming ego and duty…or so it seemed.

“P-Princess…”

Moments ago, she had been aloof, secure in her well-established world. Now, under Priscilla’s withering gaze, all that crumbled away.

“Princess, Princess, Princess…”

She seemed increasingly unhinged as she repeated herself over and over, like she needed to hear herself say it to believe what she was seeing. Her words were frantic, like the cries of a small, lost child who had finally found their parent, or a young girl who wanted nothing more than to get closer to her beloved older sister.

Neither Subaru nor any other outsider could possibly know the connection Priscilla and Arakiya shared. However, it was clear that they had a deep history, and it was just as clear that Arakiya’s will to fight had shattered.

“…!”

Lowering the slender piece of wood in her hand, Arakiya

leaned forward, overcome with emotion. She started to run, ready to leap into Priscilla's arms.

However…

"Prin—"

"Silence."

…it was not to be.

A sharp, curt voice cut her off as decisively as the flash of red.

Just as Arakiya had been about to step forward, a crimson arc appeared on the ground, inches from her bare feet. Flames sprang up, blocking her from getting any closer.

"_____"

The fire was comparable to a simple campfire, no more than shin-high. If she wanted to, she could have easily stepped over it. Instead, Arakiya froze, as if an impassable inferno raged before her.

Priscilla continued coldly as Arakiya's mind seemed to grind to a halt.

"Arakiya, why did you just attempt to approach me?"

"Huh…?"

"Did you think I would embrace you in some emotional reunion? If so, then I can only be exasperated by your thoughtlessness."

Her words were an undeniable rejection.

Arakiya's eyes widened in shock. They darted around as she desperately tried to find the right words to respond.

"L-Lady Prisca…"

"Prisca is dead. Time has passed, and you have attained a new position, yet still you have not changed," Priscilla said, before heaving a deep sigh.

Honestly, there was not enough information to guess Priscilla's true intent or what she was thinking. But even Subaru could tell how that cold response tore at Arakiya's heart.

The pain of having someone rejecting a precious bond.

Subaru was all too familiar with that heart-rending experience. He wouldn't have been surprised if Arakiya fell to her knees in anguish, but Arakiya remained standing, and a violent emotion sparked in her red eye.

It was not anger. It was a sign of her resolve.

"…Think of me however you wish, Princess. It hurts. It hurts so much, but I have made my decision," Arakiya quietly murmured.

"… Hoh. Have you, now? Perhaps you can hold my interest again. I suppose I should ask what it is you've decided."

Whether intentionally or not, Priscilla answered provocatively.

"I swear it!" Arakiya raised her head and roared as she bent low at the knees. "I'll restore your place in the empire! That's why…!"

Arakiya erupted, turning her ire not on Priscilla but on the handsome, black-haired man watching everything unfold from the balcony—Abel.

"The lying emperor must…!"

Arakiya's eyes burned with rage as her slender body danced through the air. Ignoring the flames between her and Priscilla, she set her sights on Abel. There was no way Subaru and Rem could stop her attack, battered and worn as they were. The only one who could was…

"Priscilla!"

"_____"

Subaru shouted to the woman who held a formidable blade at the ready. However, Priscilla did not so much as budge. Her crimson eyes followed Arakiya as she leaped onto the half-destroyed balcony where Abel was gripping the railing, blood flowing from a cut on his forehead. He clearly didn't have the strength to fight Arakiya, one of the strongest people in the Volakian Empire. And yet his black eyes showed no despair.

"Abel…*ngh!*"

Fully convinced that Priscilla wouldn’t make a move, Subaru tried to run over but immediately tripped. His legs refused to obey him, so all he could do was stretch out a hand as Arakiya closed in on Abel—

“_____”

Then something incomprehensible happened.

Once Arakiya drew near, Abel stomped hard on the floor of the balcony. The cracks already running along the half-broken structure spread, and the entire thing started to collapse. Abel began to fall as well—until he stopped, dangling in midair. At some point, he had managed to grab on to a curtain that had been blown onto the balcony.

It must have been hidden by his hand on the railing. This lifeline was what gave him the confidence to intentionally shatter his own foothold.

It was a strategy that would have sent a lesser opponent tumbling to their doom. Unfortunately, his opponent was one of the Volakian Empire’s strongest Divine Generals—the second-ranking one, in fact.

“Enough games…!”

Arakiya bared her fangs at Abel, who was still dangling in the air. Due to his clever plan, she had lost her footing. But in addition to superhuman physical abilities, she also possessed supernatural powers.

Her feet seemed to shimmer like a mirage for a moment, then erupted in flames from the knee down. Then she righted herself in midair, as if using her legs like the vernier thrusters on a mecha.

The flame that had burned Mizelda, the whirlwind that had scattered everyone else, the strange transformation of the floor that had caught the falling pillar, the gale that had disarmed Rem, and now this transformation of her own body into flames. Arakiya’s menacing power seemed to have limitless potential.

“Die, Emperor!”

She quickly took aim with her stick at Abel, who had no

way to evade what was coming. It was unclear whether she would run him through, unleash magic, or reveal yet another unseen power. Whatever she did, it would destroy Abel. That much was certain.

But…

“Damn, Bro. Until I heard your voice just now, even I didn’t recognize you.”

The next instant, someone suddenly appeared between the helpless Abel and the ghastly Arakiya. The figure ran across the tops of the pillars that once held up the now-missing floor, striking the threatening stick. The momentum of the thick, curved blade forcibly halted Arakiya’s charge.

Her attack disrupted, Arakiya bit her lip and channeled more power to her legs, igniting her boosters. The additional force sent the newcomer to the ground with a grumble.

“Gah, damn, my arm hurts! Can you not block me like it’s a breeze when I’m over here going all out? It really kills my motivation,” the man griped as he gave his arm a good shake.

It was an incredibly anticlimactic way to end that action scene, but Subaru did not have the presence of mind to get hung up on that. He could only stare, speechless and wide-eyed, at the last person he expected to show up.

The man was dressed like a mountain bandit and wore a distinctive black helm. Combined with his missing left arm, he cut an unmistakable figure. In hindsight, Subaru realized that he should’ve known this man would show up, given Priscilla’s presence.

“Al?”

“Hey, Bro! Talk about a coincidence, running into you so far from the border.”

Al, royal candidate Priscilla Bariel’s retainer, answered with a lighthearted tone completely at odds with the tense situation.

It was an impossible reunion with a fellow traveler from another world, here in a distant land.

2

“Al, why—?”

“Whoa, time-out there, Bro. I’d love to chat about fashion choices with you, but now’s not a great time for it.”

Al cocked his head and breezily replied. This was how he always talked, but he had just traded blows with Arakiya and was still facing off against her as she floated in the air.

It’s my first time seeing Al fight. I had no idea he was strong enough to go toe to toe with her……

“Yeah, be surprised. Not like the first strike went great, anyway.”

“Move! I have to kill him!”

“Now, why would I do that after going out of my way to stop you? But man…”

Arakiya was floating there, her face twisted in anger as Al looked her over without reservation. Arakiya had brown skin and wore the barest cloth necessary to cover herself. Al was staring at a girl in an incredibly revealing outfit, but Subaru didn’t get the sense that he was being lewd. There was an oddly emotional quality to it.

“Haah, look at how you’ve grown. I always thought you’d grow into a beautiful woman, though.”

“…Who are you?”

“I know I’m not that remarkable, but that reaction still stings, you know. Come on, we watched each other’s backs!”

Al spoke as if he knew Arakiya, but she just furrowed her brow in confusion. Al kicked a fragment of the floor at her, keeping her back while he maintained his distance.

“Watch him, Al.” Priscilla spoke curtly. “You know why I brought you instead of Schult. Do your job.”

“I’m doing it! Does it look like I’m playing around with a cutie? If I let my guard down, I’ll get torn to shreds!”

“Would that be so different from your current appearance?”

“C’mon, this has gotta be better than being torn *to shreds*, right?! Whoa!”

Al’s concentration was disrupted by his lady’s heartless remarks, and Arakiya immediately exploited the opening. She could maneuver in the air more nimbly than a bird, unleashing one attack, then a second that forced Al onto the defensive.

“You’re in the way…”

“Hearing that from a girl your age is really hard on the heart for this old man.”

Abel was still dangling, and Al continued to shield him. All the while, Arakiya peered down at them with furious eyes, her bloodlust radiating from her body. But the reason

she didn’t immediately opt for the terrifying area-of-effect attack she had opened with earlier was because…

“Priscilla…”

She called Priscilla “Princess.” Priscilla showed no emotion, but Arakiya did. That was why she couldn’t fire off an AOE attack here. That means Priscilla is the only one who can do something about this.

“Do not look at me with such imploring eyes, commoner. I will compliment that manufactured beauty, but to think that would be enough to move me is a terrible profanity.”

“*Gh*…”

Subaru turned to look at her while kneeling, but Priscilla was haughty and left no room to be worked on. Subaru was at a loss for words. But someone else spoke up.

“—Please, would you lend us your strength?”

It was Rem, whom Subaru had been shielding until now. Pursing her lips, she stepped forward unsteadily.

“Hmph,” Priscilla snorted. “An admirable manner of speech. Compared to this commoner, you seem to understand proper courtesy.”

“Then…”

“Do not be hasty. Watch. The preparations have already been made to shift the balance.”

Priscilla nodded her chin toward the battlefield.

“Eh?”

Rem turned in surprise, pulling Subaru along.

“Hah! Gah! Oww! Graaah! Ugh!”

Arakiya was flying around with fiery legs, battering Al with hit-and-run attacks, and seemed like she was seconds away from claiming both Al’s and Abel’s lives. Subaru could tell Al’s miraculous defense would not hold out forever. Just as he thought that, Arakiya managed to knock his curved sword wide. His stance collapsed, and he was defenseless. Then—

“—Hah?!”

Arakiya inexplicably lost control of her body and veered

off course. *Something* had clearly happened. Her eyes widened in surprise as she bit back a gasp. Everyone else present gulped as well. The only exceptions were Priscilla, who calmly watched from the sidelines, and the person responsible for this shocking development—

"—Now!" Abel shouted.

"I wanna hear how later!"

Hearing his command through the smoky air, Al readied his sword and leaped high to mercilessly strike Arakiya before she had a chance to recover.

Perhaps it was more merciful than not, given that he swung at her with the back of his blade.

"Imbecile," Priscilla said curtly when she saw him opt for a nonlethal attack. Her eyes saw far more than the average person's, and she already knew what would happen next.

"Just stay—agh!"

At the moment of impact, a dull thud echoed through the room. The horrific result made Subaru want to look away. Arakiya had blocked Al's swing with her left arm, shattering her forearm in the process. Blood spattered as white bone tore through the skin. But it was not a lethal wound. The next instant, her burning legs lashed out, striking Al's neck, and the impact sent him flying off what remained of the balcony.

"Gah! Aaaaaah?!"

With a clumsy shout that quickly faded, Al disappeared from view. He was almost certainly in danger, but the more pressing issue was that nothing lay between Arakiya and Abel anymore. Wary of potentially losing control again, she reverted her legs to normal and dropped to the ground.

The instant she touched down, a shadow leaped out from behind her with a ferocious shout.

"Ooooooooooo!!!!"

The figure held a large knife in a reverse grip and charged with the pure instincts of a hunter, easily knocking debris out of the way.

Stunned by the sheer intensity, it took Subaru a moment to recognize the attacker—

“Mizelda!!!”

“Aaaaaaah!!!”

Mizelda’s only response was a bloody roar.

She had been the first victim of Arakiya’s initial attack when she had burst into city hall. Her entire body was burned badly, and she attacked with a fury that made it seem like she was using up what remained of her life force to strike one final blow. Unlike Al, she spared no emotion for her prey. It was only then Subaru finally realized that Abel’s order earlier had been to her, not to Al.

Abel had foreseen this moment of vulnerability and had roused Mizelda for one last fight, even as she stood on death’s doorstep.

Subaru could not begin to imagine how many brain cells Abel had burned to instantly calculate all that in such a hopeless situation.

But even so, it wasn’t enough.

“*—Gh!*”

Arakiya easily deflected Mizelda’s attack and countered. The tip of her stick pierced Mizelda’s abs with ease, tearing into Mizelda’s body and destroying crucial organs. The stout Amazon was on the brink of death.

“Now, finally…”

“…Where are you looking?”

Arakiya assumed that she had dealt with the distraction, but Mizelda—eyes blazing, even as bubbles of blood formed at the corners of her mouth—grabbed Arakiya’s arm with both hands. She held on as tight as she could to stop her dangerous branch from moving.

A brief moment of delay was their final chance. But none of their comrades came to take advantage of Abel’s ingenuity and Mizelda’s sacrifice.

However……

“…Be proud, oni girl. Your plea has summoned my

blade.”

That was only *their* allies. There was a third force.

“_____”

Priscilla, looking out on the field of combat, stepped closer and took aim at Arakiya’s defenseless back. Arakiya immediately noticed something approaching and tried to meet the attack. But that was impossible. The moment she realized who had come up behind her, Arakiya could no longer do anything.

“Prin—”

Unable to break from her attachment to Priscilla, Arakiya was struck by a crimson slash.

The blood that erupted from her back was scorched by the flames, and she staggered badly.

“I told you, Arakiya. Make up your mind by the next time we meet.”

There was no room for an outsider to comment on whatever promise they made in the past. However, it was plain to see that Priscilla’s answer to that promise was a merciless attack and Arakiya’s answer was her lingering attachment.

Mizelda was also caught up in the attack, and they both fell to the floor in a heap, splayed out like lifeless puppets.

Silence fell as the sounds of combat vanished……

“Mizelda!”

…only to be shattered by Rem’s shout.

She half crawled as she struggled to reach Mizelda. Once she got to her and Arakiya, Rem gasped at what she saw. Mizelda’s body was scorched all over, battered by the gale, and her stomach had been split open. Gritting her teeth at the terrible sight, Rem placed her hands on Mizelda’s body. A faint light appeared as healing waves emanated from her palms.

—Somewhere along the way, she remembered how to use healing magic?

“This is no time to be staring. Lend me a hand.”

“…Ah.”

Subaru was frozen, entranced by Rem, when Abel’s voice brought him back. He shook his head and ran over to what was left of the balcony. He exchanged glances with the fearless Abel.

“So you survived? You have the devil’s luck.”

Subaru grimaced at Abel’s comment. “…Looks like you’ve still got copious reserves of biting sarcasm,” he said as he grabbed the curtain and started pulling the man up.

While Subaru was visibly worse for wear, Abel was just as battered.

I’d love to just lie down and pass out right now, but this isn’t the time.

“It’s not just Mizelda…”

A lot of people had become victims of Arakiya’s violent outburst. *In a situation where healing magic is a limited resource, first aid that doesn’t require magic is crucial. I don’t have time to keel over. That would mean accepting losses.*

I won’t let that happen.

“Get up already… Grah.”

Gritting his teeth, Subaru pulled the curtain up and grabbed Abel’s hand once it was close enough to reach. Relying on Abel’s grip, he hauled the taller man up onto solid ground.

“You have done a great deed. I commend you.”

“Piss off…”

Subaru scoffed quietly at the praise that held no trace of sincerity and then turned to help the wounded, no matter how heavy his body felt…

“—Do not move without permission, commoner. Know well who holds authority here.”

Subaru, who was sitting, and Abel, who was kneeling, both fell silent. They were overwhelmed by the quiet voice and gleaming eyes of the crimson beauty, Priscilla, who crossed her arms to enhance her bosom.

We're acquaintances. Not strangers. But I wouldn't say our relationship is good. Not just because we're in opposing camps for the royal selection, but also because of Priscilla's temperament.

Priscilla was haughty and unyielding no matter who stood before her. Subaru considered her an incredibly powerful ally when she decided their interests aligned, and an unpredictable ticking time bomb when she did not.

In the battle for the Water Gate City of Pristella, she had been a reliable ally.

…But what about now?

Should she be considered an ally because she helped us drive back Arakiya?

Either way…

"It is vexing, but the one in control at the moment is you, Prisca Benedict."

Abel spoke in place of Subaru, who found it impossible to move or talk. Still on one knee, Abel addressed Priscilla by a different name. And he hadn't been the only one. Arakiya had spoken it as well, before she'd been laid low.

Priscilla snorted slightly.

"As it happens, Prisca Benedict fell in battle and died pitifully. How could someone dead and buried be here speaking to you so readily?"

"…I see. Then who are you, and what is your name?"

"Priscilla Bariel. That is my name. You would do well to remember it, Vincent Abelks."

Answering his question grandly, Priscilla and Abel locked eyes.

Priscilla knew Abel's name, and Abel called Priscilla by a different name. Subaru gulped. He could feel the deep connection between them on his skin.

Slowly standing up, he glared at Priscilla.

"'Do not move' was the order I gave you, was it not?" Priscilla demanded.

"Yeah, I heard that. But you can eat shit. I've got things

to do.”

“Hoh? That is quite a bark to use when speaking to me.”

The scent of ozone hung in the air, and Subaru could feel the fiery heat in Priscilla’s gaze; however, he had no intention of withdrawing. He refused to let the treatment of the injured be delayed for a courtesy call to soothe her ego. He was not going to let people die because of their poor relations.

Whatever she might say, Subaru—

“Priscilla, how many times have you drawn the Sunlight Blade?”

Suddenly, still on one knee, Abel asked her a question.

He locked his gaze on her. Subaru did not know the true intent of that question. The red, gleaming, dazzling sword in her hand—the Sunlight Blade. With Arakiya defeated, the sword that was wreathed in sunlight had already been sheathed in the surrounding air. Of course, if she needed to, she could draw it again immediately, but…

“—Hey, uh, could one of you help me? Anybody? I’m about at my limit here.”

The tension was completely broken by someone calling from outside the broken balcony. It was Al. After he fell, he had evidently gotten caught on a crystal lamp just outside the wall of the building. His lame call echoed limply in the air.

Then…

“—Commoner. Pull him up. His noise disturbs my entertainment.”

“Eh…”

Priscilla gestured with her chin toward the broken balcony. The dangerous mood dissipated, and she calmly gave the order to Subaru. Struggling to keep up with the sudden change in attitude, Subaru looked over at Abel. When he did, he saw Abel sigh at Priscilla’s sudden change of heart.

“Nothing will come from staring each other down. For

now, you should do as she says."

"…Got it. Not that I'm your subordinate or anything."

He had his issues with Priscilla's sudden whims, but if he complained and she changed her mind again, that would be a problem, too. So with a perfunctory quip to Abel, he started rescuing Al.

"_____"

The safety of Mizelda and the other Shudrak, what to do about Guaral itself, Abel and Priscilla's relationship—it was all a swirling mess in his head.

Grit your teeth and forget about it for now. Focus on what's in front of you. Just do all you can to save the people in front of you, like Rem.

He wanted to get at least one step closer to the bloodless victory he had envisioned.

3

Rescuing Al from his perch on the lamp outside the building was unexpectedly difficult, since Al had offered up one of his arms to this new world. Even just pulling him up from where he was hanging, there were limited options available for someone with only one arm.

"Thanks, Medium. It would have been pretty rough for me alone."

"No problem, no problem! If anything, I'm sorry for getting knocked out at the crucial moment!"

Medium flashed a cheerful smile, looking a little worse for wear.

She had just woken up as Subaru was struggling with Al's rescue and had lent a hand. Thanks to that, Al made it through alive and was now splayed on the ground, celebrating his survival.

"Still, though, sorry about that! For not being able to help 'cause I got knocked out at the worst possible time.

My bad, my bad!”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong at all. Please don’t apologize, Medium.”

It seemed to bother Medium that she wasn’t much help when Arakiya attacked, but that was getting things backward. She and her brother had just gotten mixed up in what happened, that was all.

“The reason you couldn’t move was because you protected Flop and Utakata…and Louis.”

He praised Medium’s actions, but there was a bit of resistance in the back of his throat as he said that last part. When Arakiya’s whirlwind tore through the room, Medium had immediately protected Flop, who was beside her, and Utakata and Louis, whom she had been carrying on her shoulders. Her main regret was that she got hit in the head and conked out.

Even though Subaru wished she wouldn’t worry about it so much, she groaned and declared, “Next time! Next time I won’t be this pathetic! You can count on tomorrow’s me and Big Bro, Natsumi!”

“… It’s reassuring to hear that. But also, the two of you…”

He was about to tell them they weren’t obligated to stick around. But as he struggled to say it, her eyes widened, and his words faded.

“I’m gonna go help my bro over there! Looks like he isn’t doing so good!”

“Ah, y-yeah.”

“See ya later, Natsumi! I’m glad the masked guy didn’t fall!”

Medium ran off excitedly with a big wave. Watching her help her brother and start taking care of the wounded, Subaru could only feel sorry for the O’Connell siblings.

Will I ever be able to repay them?

“There goes a big cutie. As expected, Bro, you’re thrivin’, even in a new country.”

“Not sure what you mean by ‘thriving,’ and I’m almost afraid to ask. I’ll agree that Medium is big and cute, though. But more importantly…”

“Hmm? What is it, Bro?”

Al casually cracked his neck, but Subaru was staring him down. This was the resentment he couldn’t direct at Priscilla. Just a little bit of revenge.

It was only natural. Subaru’s questions had been set aside for long enough.

“Why the scary look? You’re wastin’ all the effort you put into that makeup and hairstyling.”

“As it happens, all that work was wasted anyway, with everything that happened a few minutes ago. Don’t get the wrong idea. The true Natsumi Schwartz is even cuter than this.”

“Natsumi Schwartz, huh?”

Al laughed meaningfully when he heard what Subaru had intended as a menacing alias. Subaru was dubious of that reaction, but Al shook his head.

“Nah, I’m just impressed by the name choice. You look good dressed like that, too. You could find a way to make some money with that, couldn’t you?”

“Don’t joke about that. First of all, this isn’t something I’d use to make money. And second, answer the question. Why are you and Priscilla here…in the Volakian Empire?”

No matter how much he thought about it, it was an incomprehensible encounter, so Subaru pressed Al straight up.

It was too unnatural to run into the two of them here in Volakia. Though they could say the exact same thing about Subaru and Rem.

“I’m gonna have to ask you to table your own questions for now, though. It’s first come, first served when it comes to questions.”

“Now, that’s a novel idea. But that isn’t actually what you want to ask me, is it, Bro?”

“What?”

“Who cares why me and the princess are here? What you really want is a way back…a path that’ll lead you out of this dangerous, scary place and bring you home. Right?”

This time, it was Subaru who got hit in a sore spot and left at a loss for words.

He couldn’t deny that his top priority was getting back to Lugunica. Even his suspicions of Al and Priscilla were trivial compared to bringing Rem safely back to Emilia and the others.

“Then do you have an answer to that? Some way to cross the border and get back to the Lugunica Kingdom…?”

“No, sorry. I know I got your hopes up and all, but I haven’t got a clue.”

“You little…”

“Now, now, don’t get angry! It’s more like, getting out of the empire right now would be difficult, is all. If you’re trying to get in, that’s one thing, but the way things have gotten, leaving is gonna be real hard.”

Subaru was getting prickly at having his emotions toyed with, but Al held up a hand to preempt any argument.

Talking in a way that never shows his real intentions, just like always… Is that what I look like to other people? I should think real hard about how to fix it.

Either way…

“It’s possible to get in, but not to get out. That’s a nice opener to a riddle, but what does it actually mean?”

“Hey, c’mon now, goes without saying, right? Even in a situation where it was easy to get out of the country, you’ve got a travel buddy with you that’d be a real problem if he got out, right?”

“…Meaning you know Abel’s identity, then?”

Al’s response led Subaru naturally to the answer.

He had heard before that it was difficult to get in and out of Volakia, but if getting out had become harder, as Al was saying, then the reason would be none other than Abel, or

rather, Emperor Vincent Volakia.

Driven from his throne and on the run, the border would be heavily guarded to prevent him from fleeing to another country.

Which means it's still just as hard to get back to Lugunica.

"What do you know, Al? If you've got that much more information than us, then…"

"Whoops. My lips are zipped now. I don't want the princess getting mad at me for blabbing about things I shouldn't. If there's something you wanna talk about, go to her. But…"

Al shrugged at Subaru, who was in such a rush.

"…I can't promise the princess will just open up about it, either."

4

"I managed to make it back alive somehow, Princess. How's your talk going?"

"It has hardly proceeded at all. Even your dangling performance made for a better show."

Priscilla was propping her cheek up in boredom as she answered Al's easygoing question.

Priscilla and the other big shots had gathered in a conference room inside city hall. The building had suffered a heavy toll from Arakiya's attack, but fortunately, its sturdy foundation was still solid, and most of the building remained functional. There was a large round table in the conference room, and Abel and Priscilla sat at opposite ends. Rounding out the gathering were General Second-Class Zikr and his strategist, representing the soldiers in the city, as well as several Shudrak led by Kuna.

"Hey, Natsumi. So you made it out okay."

"I'm glad to see you up, Kuna. How are your wounds?"

“Holly’s big body has its uses. Honestly, sitting here doesn’t feel right, so I’d like to just leave, but…”

Kuna grimaced as she answered Subaru.

Guessing the reason for that, Subaru looked down. The reason she was representing the Shudrak was because there was no one else able to fill that role.

The chief, Mizelda, and her sister, Talitta…

“Talitta’s a wreck and can’t leave the chief, and there’s no point in trying to make Holly do any talking. Still, though, even if it’s my turn…”

“No, you’re good at observing things and don’t get too heated, so you’re right for the job… It sucks that all we can do is pray for Mizelda’s recovery.”

“…Yeah…”

Mizelda was terribly wounded and on the verge of death, and Talitta was bawling her eyes out.

His concern for them occupied Subaru’s thoughts as he looked for a place to sit. He was technically the one who had masterminded the plan to capture Guaral, but his affiliations were ambiguous.

“Ms. Natsumi, if you are having trouble, then you may sit beside me, if you would like.”

As Subaru pondered what to do, Zikr leaped to his feet and pulled out a chair. Short and stout, he beamed a gentleman’s smile at Subaru.

Noticing his gaze, Subaru, who never got a chance to change his outfit, pointed to himself.

“Umm, I imagine you’ve realized this already, but I’m just cross-dressing, you know?”

“If you are here as a woman, then I, too, am here as a man. The idea of masculinity that I believe in is to be a gentleman to any woman.”

“S-so this is a womanizer in the flesh…”

People who proudly wear the title of skirt chaser are seriously built different.

Suddenly embarrassed by his lack of commitment to his

cross-dressing, he accepted Zikr's kind offer and sat in the seat he had pulled out.

"I'm sorry. Thank you for protecting me up there. You saved me."

"Not at all. My body simply moved of its own accord. I am but a coward."

The way the general called himself a coward made it sound like he was almost proud of it. It made sense in a way, since that was proof the emperor remembered him, and a sign of his unwavering beliefs.

And as for the emperor whom the upstanding Zikr held in such high esteem……

"We captured the fortress city of Guaral and turned General Second-Class Zikr Osman, who commands the soldiers quartered in the city. This is in addition to the Shudrak of the Badheim Jungle, who we already count among our allies."

"Utterly insufficient. I have heard of the valiance of the Shudrak, but that is not nearly enough to move against the empire."

"A sensible analysis. What forces do you bring, Priscilla?"

"My personal soldiers have not crossed the border. Without them, what could be called my forces are that iron-helmed jester, a drunkard swordsman, and a page whose only saving grace is being adorable."

Abel was exchanging information and reviewing the situation with Priscilla, moving along at a steady pace.

The conversation made their intelligence clear while resisting intrusion from their surroundings without any explicit rejection. For that very reason, Subaru made a point of forcing his way in.

"Hold up."

I've been run around plenty already, and now I'm being left behind here, too.

"What, commoner? You were here?"

"I'm here, and maybe I'm not the one to say it, but it's

crazy if the way I look now doesn't leave an impression. When Beako saw this, she was speechless for minutes."

"I have already complimented that appearance. Did you think you would receive a reward for bringing Al in like linens hung out to dry?"

"Of course not! Well, maybe a little. But more like, I expected you might at least lend me your ear."

Priscilla's eyes narrowed as Subaru put his hands on the round table and leaned forward. She was appraising him, but Subaru was not scared. Unlike before, Kuna and Zikr were here, too. *But needing backup does make me feel kinda pathetic.*

"Anyway, why are you here like it's totally natural? I got nowhere asking Al, so give me a straight answer."

"What an annoying question. It's obviously to speak with that man—Vincent Abelks."

Priscilla answered coolly, jerking her chin toward Abel, who was sitting across from her. Out of the corner of his eye, Subaru looked at Abel, crossing his arms.

"To talk to Abel…? How did you know where he was?"

"There is a mechanism for transporting the emperor within the throne in Lupghana. If the emperor can foresee an impending coup, it allows them to flee to the east. It leads to a place where generations of emperors are interred."

"The emperor's tomb?"

"The mechanism in question deposits them there. Given that, Vincent… I suppose it would be more convenient to call you 'Abel' for now."

The fire in Priscilla's eyes glowed red as the conversation shifted from Subaru to Abel. Sighing a bit at that fiery gaze, Abel nodded.

"Yes, call me 'Abel' now. At the very least, I have no right to call myself 'emperor' when my throne has been stolen."

"Admirable, sincere, or stupidly forthright… Either way, you've grown soft. It seems all that time you spent sitting

on the throne has made you forget how to stand.”

“What a rich thing to say to my face.”

Even Abel did not hide the dangerous mood Priscilla’s merciless taunts evoked. In an instant, their gazes clashed with white-hot intensity, and there seemed to be a whiff of ozone in the room. Just when it seemed the discussion would run aground and fireworks would be unavoidable…

“Now, now, calm down, both of you. Nothing will come of fighting.”

It was a bold move, like walking into an armory loaded with gunpowder ready to blow with a lit cigarette. Al was laughing lightly as he rested his elbows on the back of Priscilla’s chair.

“She might look like this, but the princess has her cute side, too, you know? She pushed a flying dragon so hard, it almost gave out while rushing here to Guaral. That’s how much she was looking forward to this mov— Gah?!”

“Imbecile.”

Al tried to defend Priscilla’s humanity, but his lady did not grasp what he was trying to do in the slightest and violently smacked him in the head with her fan.

Al groaned and arched over, falling to his knees.

“The arrogance in even attempting to speak for me. When did you grow so conceited? You are a jester and should know your place.”

“Y-you being so pissed is pretty good proof, ain’t it…? But it is true you came to help, right?”

She stared daggers at Al, and the displeasure in her crimson eyes was obvious. But the fact that she didn’t deny it confirmed Al was on the mark.

“You came…to help Abel…?”

Subaru could not shake the confusion, because that was just too hard to accept. Looking at the results and her actions, of course there was no mistaking that she had saved Abel, Subaru, and the others. However, everything Subaru knew about her made it hard for him to accept that

at face value.

I know she'll happily crush anyone who gets on her bad side, but does the concept of fighting to protect others even exist in Priscilla Bariel?

"Your eyes reveal you are thinking something insulting. Did you want them to be carved out, commoner?"

"No, definitely not. That's not the sort of thing someone who wants to save people would say."

"At any rate, you understood that I escaped to the east using the mechanism in the throne. In that case, you could also predict I would make contact with the Shudrak and come to Guaral."

"…She could?"

Subaru acknowledged that Priscilla had extraordinary foresight, but he struggled to accept what Abel seemed to consider a matter of course.

It would explain a lot, but……

"Don't interrupt, Bro. The smart folks here accepted it. Just leave it at that, and we can avoid an argument we don't need to have."

"Are you really all right with that…?"

"Whether I am or not, I still have to take it. If it turns into a struggle, it's only gonna make things worse for you. Since me and the princess would win."

Subaru was a little surprised to hear Al whisper that with such surety, even while still kneeling on the ground.

Honestly, he did not really expect Al to state so bluntly that they would win. He had always had, if not quite modesty, then a certain detachedness from his surroundings.

In fact, the knights of all the other royal selection candidates were renowned for their strength. Compared to the others, Subaru and Al were not particularly special.

Because of that, Subaru had felt a certain sense of fellowship with Al, which was all the more reason he was surprised by the certainty in Al's voice.

He's flippant and unserious and seems the same as ever, but there's something about him that's changed. Something brought about in the days of fighting caused by the royal selection and by his relationship with Priscilla.

"Though, me sayin' somethin' like that is against someone I at least have a one-in-a-million chance of beating. On that point, Arakiya was princess-level bad. I really couldn't find any way of winning."

"…I mean, she's one of the strongest of Volakia's Nine Divine Generals. That'd be like Reinhard or Julius in Lugunica."

If we're talking the strongest in Lugunica, then Reinhard and Julius would definitely be on the list. Roswaal's a top court magician, so he might also make the list.

Subaru would probably add Wilhelm and Garfiel for his dream team to face the Nine Divine Generals.

"That's not really the point. And even if we're talking about the Nine Divine Generals, I can't imagine they have someone like Reinhard…"

"Unfortunately, you would be incorrect."

"Hah?"

As the opponent they had to be most on guard against, Subaru had been trying to measure their strength, when he heard something from Abel that made him want to get his ears checked.

Did he just say there is someone who can match Reinhard?

"There are more buggy builds like Reinhard?"

"I am unfamiliar with that word, but if your question is whether they are a match for him, then the answer is yes. There is the First, who stands above Arakiya."

"The highest ranking of the Nine Divine Generals…"

"Cecils Segmund."

Zikr quietly answered as Subaru gaped like a fish out of water. Subaru grasped that that was the name of the aforementioned First. *So that's the empire's strongest,*

Volakia's vaunted glitch character……

"A swordsman of unbelievable power known as 'The Blue Lightning of Volakia,' one hailed in the same breath as Lugunica's Sword Saint, Kararagi's Admirer, and Gusteko's Mad Prince."

"Ugh… I have heard that title before, but… So you're serious?" Subaru asked, his face suddenly tense.

"The moment you make an enemy of him, your head will roll. That is the sort of man he is," Abel said with a nod, arms crossed.

Neither Abel nor Zikr had a reason to lie or joke right now, meaning they were speaking the simple truth. Cecils Segmund was the strongest man in the empire and on par with Reinhard. Just from that description, he sounded like a dangerous swordsman, and Subaru felt a chill run down his back just imagining how rough and violent an opponent he must be.

"…But then again, we did beat Arakiya, who's Number Two, so that's a pretty big win for us," Al said cheerfully as a heavy mood settled over Subaru and the others.

"Al…"

That's one way to look at it, but it isn't really making me feel any better about our odds.

Still, he understood what Al was trying to do. Subaru took a deep breath and said, "That's right," agreeing out loud.

They had managed to capture the city with minimal casualties. They were out on a limb without backup, and it was hard to say for sure who was an enemy and who was a friend, but they had even gotten help from Priscilla and Al. Rem was surely doing her best to heal the wounded Shudrak. Mizelda would recover and give him another lesson in her handsomeness-theory-of-everything.

So…

"Al's right. Defeating one of the Nine Divine Generals, and a major one at that, was huge for us. You can count on

one hand the number of people above her, so I'm sure she'll have some useful information."

"Yeah, there you go! Now you're thinking with your head, Bro. Information's worth more than gold in a war. We managed to capture her alive and all, too. Let's ask her some questions."

"Yeah, we might get some good leads……"

Subaru was forcing himself to cheer up, and Al was matching his spirit as the conversation started shifting toward getting information out of their live prisoner, Arakiya.

"Wait a minute, Subaru and Iron Mask. I'm going to have to object."

But the Shudrak representative, Kuna, put a stop to that.

As Subaru and Al turned around, Kuna touched her green-dyed hair and explained, "That woman was dangerous. Who knows what she'd do if given a single opening. It's definitely better to just kill her now."

"That's… I get it, but killing her now is too hasty."

"After what happened to the chief? No matter what you say, none of the Shudrak will be satisfied unless she's executed."

Staring Subaru down, Kuna bluntly declared that Arakiya's life should be forfeit.

When she pointed out Mizelda's condition, Subaru could only swallow his words. The Shudrak chief was in Rem's care at the moment, but even if her wounds were healed, that would not change what had been done.

If the Shudrak refused to forgive it, Arakiya would be made to pay the price.

"_____"

Subaru searched for an answer to Kuna while glancing at Priscilla. Priscilla had been shown to have some deep connection with Arakiya, so he was trying to see if she had any reaction to Kuna's statement.

But…

“I have already decided where Arakiya and I stand. It was I who cut her down. Are those black eyes on your head just for decoration?”

“*Gh…*”

“I have no intention of expending my words for Arakiya’s sake. If her fate ends here, then that is her path. Though it is a sour note.”

“…I don’t understand you at all.”

Subaru shook his head at how casual Priscilla was when Arakiya’s life was hanging in the balance. Considering their most recent interaction, their current relationship couldn’t be amazing, but based on Arakiya’s attitude, they must have been close at some point. Priscilla’s attitude was terribly cold, all things considered.

An outsider like me can’t know what went down between them.

“But it’s all over if she dies. Life isn’t something that just returns on its own.”

“You presume to lecture me on the value of life? Are you suggesting I misjudge the value of others’ lives?”

“…You aren’t omnipotent. You’ve made mistakes before, too, I’m sure.”

Looking Priscilla straight in the eye, Subaru answered with only the briefest pause.

The room grew tense. Kuna and Zikr gulped, and Al put his hand on the forehead of his helmet. Subaru quickly realized that, in the heat of the moment, he had stepped in it.

This is one of those situations where you only realize afterward that you said something that’s bound to provoke Priscilla and get you killed.

He was expecting that gleaming red sword of hers to take his head from his shoulders any second now.

In which case…

“I’m not wrong. You have made mistakes before, too.”

Subaru repeated the life-forfeiting words.

In an instant, Priscilla’s eyes narrowed, ready to evoke an inferno to punish him for his brazen comment. A merciless death wrought by a sacred sword……

“Even I err, you say. What a vexing statement.”

…did not come.

“Eh…”

Subaru let out a squeak as his highly anticipated death was canceled. Glancing scornfully at him, Priscilla opened her fan with a loud snap and looked past Subaru to Kuna.

“Before you take her head, it would be good to probe for a use for it first,” she said, contrary to her previous opinion.

“Hah. Giving us directions? An outsider like you?”

“If you can ignore them, then you are welcome to try.” Priscilla’s eyes scorched Kuna’s slender body.

Kuna reflexively hugged herself under the palpable pressure of that gaze. Unfortunately, she was clearly outmatched.

Kuna bit her lip, frustrated and ashamed that she had backed down. Priscilla simply snorted.

“Honestly, I was sweating for a minute there, but looks like the discussion has settled!”

Al’s hand thunked loudly on the table, shattering the tense mood. Having gathered everyone’s attention, he looked at Subaru through the visor of his helm.

“Congrats on not dyin’, Bro, but it’s also good to hear there won’t be one less sexy, cute girl in this world. And once she wakes up—”

“—Bad news!”

With a pointless bit of banter, Al started to sum up how they would handle Arakiya when heavy footsteps and a frantic voice rang out. Holly squeezed her large body through the doorway into the room.

She was breathing heavily as everyone looked at her.

“A pair of imperial soldiers came in and freed the prisoner!”

INTERLUDE

HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS

1

“If you’re alive, you’ll get more chances to get your revenge for that disgrace, but if you’re dead, that’s all there is. So I’m going. I’m not taking a fight with no chance of winning.”

There was no lie in those words. Rushing into a battle with little chance of success was the foolishness of an utter imbecile.

I’m not remotely a wise man, which is precisely why I have to be so careful in my judgment. Conclusions that someone wise might reach in an instant, I have to take longer to find.

Todd Fang knew that was how the have-nots fought.

Do not engage in a battle with no hope of victory, and as for the reverse……

“That doesn’t mean just taking battles with a good chance of winning, either.”

He held a loosely clenched fist up to his right eye and looked through the slight opening, trying to make out something in the distance. It was a primitive means of seeing farther by restricting his field of vision. Todd’s eyes could see quite far just by squinting, but even so, he could not peer into the chaotic city hall.

Even though it was much better ventilated now.

“Hey, the roof of the damn building is gone! What happened?!”

Right beside him, his savage companion was chirping with an excess of motivation.

Todd waved his hand to quiet him; he was too loud, distracting his concentration. And he shut up. The man was being unexpectedly obedient.

“The Divine General definitely went in, though.”

Of course, or else they would not have stuck around in a fortress that had fallen to the enemy. Todd had fully intended to leave the city when the city hall had fallen into enemy hands. He had no intention of politely disarming and surrendering.

If the enemy mastermind was that child of war, the one who identified himself as Natsumi Schwartz, then any seeds of trouble like Todd or Jamal would be eliminated right away.

Even in Volakia, executing prisoners of war without cause was generally considered unacceptable, but if it was up to Todd, he would absolutely manufacture some pretext and sign their death warrants. And so the only logical choice was to escape immediately.

What changed Todd’s mind was noticing the reinforcements that had appeared in the city.

“There’s no mistake. I saw her before on the campaign two years ago… That was Number Two, General First-Class Arakiya.”

There was no sliver of doubt in Jamal’s rough voice. He had seen her easily leap over the closed front gate and race across the rooftops.

He’s like pure feral instincts walking around in clothes. He would never forget someone who struck a chord with him, either in terms of strength or as a male judging potential mates. In other words, one of the empire’s strongest, a Divine General, came here to quell the

rebellion.

That was, without a doubt, the chance of victory that had been lacking.

“It’s enough of a chance that we should consider whether we should hitch our wagon.”

There was not even any need to coordinate with the general. They just had to be more useful to her than the incompetents who were captured in the city hall. The general would have a better impression of them even if they simply captured and interrogated an enemy or fell into some sort of leadership position.

In doing so, he would be able to climb the ranks, and a path back to the capital might open sooner.

“All right, let’s turn back, Jamal. We’ll help retake city hall.”

“Oh? Ahh, really! Ka-ha-ha, good! All this running away was making me break out in hives. Can’t just let the general first-class have all the glory!”

“Don’t be stupid. We’re being given her leftovers.”

Todd sighed, seeing Jamal so thrilled at the change of plans to head back into danger, before turning back to the city, observing the building from a distance, and deciding what would be the best opportunity to sell himself.

Everything was in line with his convictions, carefully, oh so carefully building up…

“Kill him, Arakiya.”

The general’s rampage atop the hollowed-out top floor of the city hall was barely visible. The dark-skinned, silver-haired Divine General was wielding a stick that looked like it had just been picked up off the ground, running wild as if she existed outside the rules of the world.

The Shudrak and imperial soldiers all lay in heaps on the ground without distinction, scattered around the ravaged room. And amid it all, none other than Natsumi Schwartz

stood between Arakiya and the blue-haired girl.

Todd's immediate thought was, *Nothing could be more foolish than boldly standing before a general first-class; I'm amazed he's still alive*. His nerves were drawn taut, and in his heart, he cried out, *Kill him now. And make sure, Arakiya*.

Even if it cost him all credit and recognition, what he wanted most was to be absolutely sure of that man's death.

That was…

"…Hey, are you kidding me?"

As he focused, concentrating on not missing the moment Arakiya killed Natsumi, something seemed to flicker across the top of his vision, and his earnest wish was shattered.

A gleaming red flash intervened between Natsumi and Arakiya. Someone of absolute strength had protected him. The moment he saw that, the scales inside Todd tilted.

"What was that in the sky?! A flying dragon?! Where'd it come from?!"

"_____"

"What do we do, Todd?! Shouldn't we go help Arakiya?! Hey, you liste—?"

"—Quiet, Jamal."

Jamal's voice grew uncontrolled at the sudden development, but Todd silenced him with a word. Todd kept his eyes on the events in the city hall, not even glancing at Jamal. The woman in the crimson dress was facing off with Arakiya head-on.

He could tell immediately—*That woman's another abnormal one; she's one of the "haves."*

And painfully, it confirmed again that Natsumi, who had survived yet again in a situation that seemed so impossibly hopeless, was a "have," too, albeit not blessed in combat ability or physical prowess.

"Todd…!"

"Don't move, Jamal. Nothing good will come of it even if you do."

The chance of victory that had been dangling there was gone, and the situation steadily worsened as Todd watched. He acknowledged Jamal's anger, but if they acted now, it would just lead to a meaningless death.

Since…

"General First-Class Arakiya was just taken out."

The red woman's blade slashed Arakiya's back, and she crumpled to the ground helplessly. The listing scales finally broke, never to tip back the other way.

2

"_____"

Arakiya had been defeated, and the situation in the city hall reached its conclusion.

This time, the fortress city of Guaral had completely and totally fallen to the enemy. There was no way to undo it now. The scales had been dashed and all that remained was how to deal with the defeat.

"What to do?"

Todd thought quietly, having watched the events unfold from the shadow of a building.

If he was honest, he was seething with anger and bitterness, but there was no point in venting, either. Now that their reason for coming back was gone, the wise choice would be to beat a hasty retreat, but…

"Hey, Todd…don't tell me you're thinkin' of shamelessly turning tail here."

Unfortunately, he could not find the words to convince Jamal, who had a bulging vein on his forehead.

It had taken everything he had to convince Jamal when the flag atop the city hall was burned and the city first fell. But that situation had been far better for guiding Jamal's emotions. He had been able to get him to take his hand off the sword he had almost drawn and listen to reason,

however reluctantly. But he could not do that again now, not after the sword had been drawn. *In fact, if I choose the wrong words here, that sword might just be pointed at me.*

If that happened, even if it was Jamal, he would lose any reason not to kill him.

And I'd rather not have to kill my future brother-in-law.

I wouldn't be able to keep my promise to my betrothed to return safely with him, either.

"Maybe that angle?"

"Aah?"

"…I understand how you're feeling. But cool your head. If General First-Class Arakiya was defeated, then we have no chance of winning head-on. Do you want your little sister to grieve a pointless death?"

"_____"

He tried to placate Jamal using his familial love. Jamal was silent for a moment, as if it might have worked, and then he wordlessly reached out, grabbed Todd's shirt, and pulled him close.

"If you think you can always get me to pull back by bringing up Katya, you're dead wrong."

"Really? …That's a shame."

Shaking his head slowly, Todd answered with genuine disappointment.

If letting Jamal hit him a couple of times would soothe him, then Todd would let him do it, but Jamal apparently had no intention of that, just pushing him away with a scoff.

Doesn't seem to be a need to do something myself, but I don't have a way to stop him, either.

Fortunately, he knew the lay of the land after searching for any secret entrances to the city. With the chaos of Arakiya's arrival, it would be easy enough to escape. Jamal even looked like he was going to draw attention with a little rampage of his own.

"Jamal, sorry, but I'm going. I know me saying this probably won't change anything, but you're going to die

like a dog. Even if you charge in, killing all of them is…”

“Dumbass! I’m not gonna do something that stupid! I’m gettin’ General First-Class Arakiya out.”

“…What?”

He had expected the warning to be meaningless, but it had drawn out an unforeseen response. Todd suddenly stopped and turned around.

“What?” Jamal asked grumpily. “Did you think I was plannin’ to go on a suicide charge?”

“Yeah, I did. I honestly thought you’d want to die a pointless death.”

“You can screw off! I go along with all the little schemes you think up, but I have a head on my shoulders, too! I know what I can and can’t do.”

Jamal genuinely surprised Todd with a response that could only be called unexpected.

I knew he had his merits in combat, but when it comes to everything else, he’s so impulsive and coarse, I honestly wonder if he even has a brain.

“If you’re a coward, then whatever. Katya didn’t know how to pick a good man. I’ll rescue the general by myself if I have to. She’s got a nice ass, anyway.”

“Wait, I’m going, too.”

“Say what?! You saying you’re satisfied with just Katya’s ass…?”

“I had no intention of joining you in suicide, but it’s different if that’s not the plan.”

Not heeding the slanderous aspersions being cast, Todd shut Jamal’s mouth with his palm. Forcefully silencing him, he shifted gears in his head, constructing plans for this new course of action.

Improvisation on the fly was not in his nature, but unfortunately, having spent enough time working with Jamal, he had become much more experienced at it than he would have liked.

If Jamal had insisted on a glorious suicide charge to

retake the city hall, then Todd would have just left him, but if his goal was to rescue Arakiya, then that was different.

Things in the city hall are gradually entering their final stage.

They needed to be wary of Natsumi and the red woman. Doing anything in their general vicinity would be suicidal. However, the enemy was not unscathed, either.

If their focus waned, there would be an opening to exploit.

“I’ll charge in and make a distraction, and you use that —”

“Just when I was starting to be impressed… There are two people there we have to be wary of. At all costs, we can’t start something when they are around. What? You don’t need to worry.”

Soothing Jamal, who was getting impatient, Todd took a softer expression as he looked through the gap made by his fingers. Behind it, he was chuckling, his tongue flicking against white canines.

He saw Arakiya being carried off, in critical condition.

As long as she’s not a corpse, there are any number of ways to get her out.

3

The city hall had been their base, so it was a simple thing to sneak into the building.

Todd had a habit of memorizing the layout and spaces of any place he had been before. He could not feel comfortable staying somewhere long if he did not have an idea of escape routes or hiding places.

Because of that, he was well studied—on where to kill someone and hide the body without drawing attention.

“*Gh.*”

Slipping into the building, he blinded the watching eyes

scattered here and there.

The sentries were guards drawn from the local militia. They had been supporting the army originally, but now that the city had been captured, they were a potential threat, little more than weather vanes that had become rebels.

“Ain’t no mercy for the likes of you.”

Jamal vented angrily as he grabbed the sentry’s neck with both hands and twisted violently.

As a noble of the empire, Jamal took pride in being a soldier of Volakia. There was no limit to his anger at any guard who sided with a rebel army.

“Can’t say I understand the feeling, though.”

I’m just killing because I need to. If I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t.

He had no room to criticize changing sides too quickly or sticking to someone powerful to survive. Though of course, they would still pay with their lives for their mistaken judgment.

He and Jamal proceeded to their target, eliminating any sentries in their way.

There was a jail underground, beneath the city hall. It was where criminals were kept pending the mayor’s verdict. In Todd’s estimation, there was a good chance that Arakiya would be held there.

“—There, the general.”

As they entered the underground, there were several jail cells lining the left and right. The cells were arranged in order of severity of crime, starting with the most basic up front, all the way to the sturdiest cells in the back. And of course, Arakiya was in the farthest, most secure cell.

On watch here was not a local guard but a Shudrak woman with hair dyed yellow. She was a big woman with a spear in hand, and it was obvious at a glance she was far more skilled than any of the local guards.

“No dodging that one. Means the sneaking around ends here.”

“…Why do you sound so happy about that?”

He struggled to understand why Jamal could be so happy facing a powerful enemy who could not be avoided.

In general, I guess he’s thinking that the more dangerous, the more bloody, the more he can prove his devotion to the empire.

It was not the sort of thing Todd would think.

“Isn’t it obvious? Fight like a real Volakian and take our victory by force! That’s how I can call myself a Volakian soldier with pride.”

“…It’s a weird thing, feeling surprised to hear you say basically exactly what I imagined.”

It’s rare to see someone whose words and actions line up so neatly.

Ignoring Jamal, who glared at that answer, Todd observed the woman watching the cell. Her body was sturdy, and her limbs had a good amount of flesh protecting them, too. Considering the Shudrak’s physical abilities, taking an arm or leg in one shot with his ax was probably not happening.

Which naturally means hitting her head or cutting her neck? Could try to split her face open, too, but……

“Times like this, it’s my turn.”

Jamal grinned audaciously and stepped straight forward without thinking.

Todd hesitated for a second on whether to stop him, but he said nothing. As it happened, the first option that he had come up with for improvisation was pushing Jamal out to draw attention.

If he’s keen to save me the effort, there’s no need to go out of my way to stop him.

“Mrgh, who are you?!”

“Do I even have to answer? You dishonored the Volakian swordwolf. Did you think you won just ’cause I wasn’t on the field to fight?!”

“Someone weird!”

Watching Jamal walk through the room, the Shudrak woman readied her large spear. Meanwhile, Jamal drew his twin blades and leaped forward with bloodshot eyes.

Jamal caused all sorts of problems, but his strength was undeniable. At the very least, one-on-one with a Shudrak, he would not be caught off guard.

"*Oraoraoraoraora!*"

"Hah! A strong one!"

Roaring with an annoyingly loud voice, he hammered at the Shudrak with wild dancing blades. The Shudrak skillfully evaded and parried using her spear, but it was a one-sided defense.

She had been set to guard Arakiya, so she was certain to be strong to some degree. But she had apparently not expected someone to suddenly appear to break Arakiya out.

Under the brunt of Jamal's ferocious attack, she had no way to stop Todd, who leaped out after him.

"Ah! Another…*gyaaagh!*"

"You think you can look away?! Huh?!"

With some help from an uncommonly tactful Jamal, Todd hammered his ax into the lock of the cell.

There's no time to look for a key. I can't break the cell itself, but I can at least smash the front of the lock.

There was a dull thud and a hard crack as the edge of the ax chipped badly, but in exchange, the lock of the cell shattered. Todd pulled the squealing door open and jumped in.

"General First-Class Arakiya!"

There was a single unconscious girl lying face down on a simple bed inside. The reason Arakiya was on her back was the slash that ran down it. The painful scar almost made it seem as if she had been branded.

Her skin had been seared even as it was being cut, leaving that gruesome mark.

You don't get a wound like that without a sword that's red hot.

“What did that red woman…?”

The woman was no normal person, and the prized sword she wielded had an abnormal power, too, no doubt.

That was all the information he had, though, and Arakiya did not respond to his voice. So without another option, Todd lifted her up and rushed out of the cell.

“I got her! Let’s go, Jamal!”

“I won’t let…! Agh?!”

“I told you! Don’t! Look! Away!!!!”

The Shudrak woman’s attention shifted for a split second when Arakiya was taken out of the cell. Jamal leaped at the opening with a slash, which she blocked immediately with her spear, but the impact knocked away her weapon, leaving her defenseless as Jamal hit her with a spinning kick.

She slammed into the wall with a cry. Her head hit the stone, and she slumped to the ground and stopped moving.

Seeing that, Todd started to tell him to finish her, but…

“*Ngh!* It’s getting noisy up there. Did they find one of the sentries?”

“*Tch*, we can’t hang around here. What about the general—?”

“She’s unconscious but not dead. That’s enough.”

Answering concisely, Todd hurried out of the underground jail. Easily catching up and passing him, Jamal took the lead and the job of opening a path.

“Who is…*gh*?!”

“Outta the way, you dumbasses!”

A guard who peered down into the jail was hit with a slash and blown back. Following behind Jamal as the alarm was raised, Todd started sprinting, too.

Sorry, but I can’t afford to worry too much about how delicate I should be with your body. Besides, a Divine General should have a hardy physique.

Trusting in her endurance, he just ran.

“We’re out! Where now?!”

“The main gate is closed. Follow me.”

Threading through the night as the city grew noisy, Todd led Jamal into a back alley and through the narrow streets and side paths to lose any enemies chasing them.

The battle just ended, the confusion of the battlefield hasn’t fully settled, and there are three hundred imperial soldiers wearing the same uniforms in the city. They won’t be able to tell us apart.

Now to just…

“*—Ngh!*”

There was an air-splitting sound, and a sword swung down just behind Todd. Looking back, he saw a thick arrow sticking into the ground at his feet. It would have hit Todd if Jamal hadn’t knocked it down.

A precise attack while they were in the middle of the city, and after having run through backstreets to escape notice. It was undoubtedly the same archer who had caught Todd in the torso a few days earlier.

—I’m being watched.

In which case, he could not move carelessly. If he left the alleys, he would be a target, and it was difficult for him to move nimbly while carrying Arakiya. Even if he wanted to kill the archer, judging by the angle, the enemy was on an upper floor of the city hall—going back a third time wasn’t an option.

Should I abandon Arakiya and run? It’s the most likely way to save my life now, but then why did I risk danger in the first place?

Considering the situation and my possible moves, the highest return is…

“Jamal, you know we’re being targeted.”

“Yeah, it’s a dangerous one. They’re too far to go kill. At this rate, they’ll just keep shooting at us without us being able to do anything. What’s the plan?”

“…There’s only one option.”

Jamal’s one eye narrowed at those words. Exhaling a

deep breath, Todd closed an eye.

“The enemy is going to aim at us, so you take the lead and knock the arrows down. Not just one, but the second and third ones, too. Meanwhile, I’ll run as fast as I can without dropping the general.”

“Hah, that ain’t like you. That’s your plan? You must be desperate.”

“That’s the only option left when you’re out of cards to play. But I’m still lucky.”

“Huh? How do you figure that?”

“’Cause I’ve got one strong card left to play: You.”

The plan was basically just relying entirely on Jamal’s swordsmanship. If Jamal failed to knock down all the coming arrows, both of them would die. As far as Todd was concerned, that sort of reckless gambling was not sane. Even so, he still proposed this plan. With Jamal’s swords, the chances were not zero.

Jamal scratched his head.

“…Katya really doesn’t have an eye for men. I figured you for a smarter guy.”

“Don’t bad-mouth my fiancée, Big Brother.” Todd smiled wryly.

Jamal snorted, adjusted his grip on his swords, and then turned his burly back toward Todd.

“All right, I’m in. A stupid gamble isn’t the worst thing every once in a while.”

“It feels like you’d do these sorts of gambles a lot more if I wasn’t around.”

“Shut up. Just keep your mouth shut and try to keep up!”

With that final quip, Jamal burst out of the alley. Immediately, an arrow hurtled through the air at him.

“*Ngh!*”

Jamal reacted with incredible reflexes and cut it down with both swords. The impact rebounded into his wrists. Gritting his teeth, the swordwolf grinned.

His blood boiled, and his heart raced. A feeling of

swelling vitality consumed Jamal.

“Ha-ha-ha!”

They raced through the shower of arrows that poured down, one after the other. Slashing, spinning, swinging his swords like a dance, he cut down and knocked away the arrows. It was Jamal Aurelie’s sword dance. Even Todd was impressed by Jamal’s great work dealing with the ferocious attacks. Todd followed without a sound as the arrows, propelled by incredible force, rained down. He knew that breaking Jamal’s focus would be a death sentence.

And of course, Jamal’s attention was focused entirely on avoiding oncoming death.

Advancing, evading, deflecting, stepping, leaping, parrying, cutting.

And…

“…Shit.”

Jamal cursed when they reached the end of the road, where a row of Shudrak spears were waiting for them. Handling that many Shudrak while being targeted by an archer was incredibly difficult. Nigh impossible, even. Confirming the feel of the swords in his hands, Jamal opened up honestly to Todd behind him.

“All those cunning little tricks, just to be abandoned by luck in the end, huh…? Hah, it’s a hollow feeling. But it wasn’t so bad.”

He had been running around because of Todd’s plans and schemes, and there were plenty of little annoyances. But they had chosen to struggle to the end, like proper Volakian soldiers, so…

“I did Katya wrong, but that’s how it is. She’s a noble, too, barely. She knows it might end like this for you and me.”

Thinking of his sister back in the capital, Jamal felt a little twinge in his heart. But it was quickly erased by a desire to fight and the smell of blood.

And that was a relief. He was a swordwolf of Volakia

down to his bones.

“Let’s do this, Todd. Let’s at least give ’em one last show!!!”

Leaning forward, Jamal licked the blood that dripped from behind the patch over his right eye. And then he leaped at the enemy with the fury and dignity a Volakian soldier ought to show in their final moments.

A storm of lethal attacks rained down on him, but he had no more regrets.

That he could be himself to the very end was worth more to him than any medal of honor.

4

“…You were an idiot to the very end.”

Todd murmured as he slipped through a hole in the wall as Jamal’s ferocious howl echoed in the distance.

Sealing the entrance as soon as he passed, he made sure to erase all traces so that he would not be followed. The pursuers would take some time with Jamal, so he should have time to get away.

As Jamal had said, it had not been like him. Todd would never commit to such a desperate plan, not over his dead body. Or more accurately, he would never do something like that precisely because he did not want to die.

“You’ll draw their attention for me. I feel a little sorry for Katya, though…”

Not being able to keep his promise to bring her brother back would be a heavy blow to his fiancée.

I need to get back to the capital as soon as possible in order to comfort her. Fortunately, in exchange for losing Jamal, I did pick up another means of getting back to the capital.

And it was a trump card that might connect to something far bigger than Jamal. It might even mean a shot at a

general third-class rank.

"…Prin…cess…"

"Sheesh, that's quite the cherubic face for a Divine General who's killed hundreds."

Tears flowed from Arakiya's closed eye as Todd carried her. As he looked at them, he had the thought, *Huh, I've got another one-eyed companion*.

And then he cocked his head.

"Which one of Jamal's eyes was it again…?"

CHAPTER 2

SELF-PROCLAIMED HERO SUBARU NATSUKI

1

The report that Arakiya had been spirited away shook the room.

The Divine General they had captured at such cost, whom they had just been discussing how to handle. Pursuers were sent out to recover her immediately, but…

“I’m ashamed to say we could not catch her, even with Holly’s bow. They got away.”

“Mhm…”

Kuna and Holly apologized despondently.

Their long-distance sniping had been foiled. When Holly brought the awful news, Kuna immediately went to the roof of the building and searched for the enemy below, to hunt them down together with Holly, just as when they had shot Todd from outside the city. However, the enemy had split up, with one serving as a diversion while the other fled with the general.

Abel offered his grim analysis. “These agents slipped behind enemy lines with a small force and slipped away the moment they achieved their narrowly defined goals. Considering the division of responsibilities and the courage needed to put it into action, they will not be caught, even if pursued.”

“…How will I face the chief or Talitta?”

Kuna bit her lip in chagrin. Holly gently put a hand on her shoulder, but as the Shudrak representative who argued so strongly about how they should deal with Arakiya, Kuna had serious regrets.

But there was a cold logic to Abel’s analysis.

The enemies who took Arakiya were meticulous, and it would be extremely difficult to capture them.

“—If her life remains, then that shows there is yet a role for her to play.”

“Priscilla…”

Priscilla’s quiet voice broke the silence.

Priscilla had seemed to be resigned to Arakiya’s fate. *I don’t know what she thinks about this, but those crimson eyes are unreadable.*

What Subaru did know was that she, at least, did not wish for Arakiya to die.

“So, what are we gonna do about little Arakiya? Just leave her be?”

“…They’ve already escaped, so there’s nothing else to do.”

Subaru answered Al’s ill-timed comment with a bitter look on his face. Given that they had dealt with Kuna’s and Holly’s sniping, they had a solid amount of skill and strength. In addition, if Arakiya woke up during the escape, she would be too much to handle. It would just lead to more casualties.

—And there are already casualties from the guards killed when they broke into the city hall.

“…‘Bloodless siege,’ my ass. How stupid can I be?”

Subaru mussed the long black hair of his wig, cursing himself pathetically.

He had made a bold promise of a bloodless victory—a plan to take Guaral without losses on either side—and yet, despite his best intentions, there had been so many sacrifices.

If anyone accused him of being a liar who broke his promise, he had no excuse. Even if no one else did, he would blame himself.

A shameless liar and a con artist……

“—A ‘bloodless siege’?”

A voice repeated Subaru’s murmured words, as if reflecting on them.

It was Priscilla, who was sitting at the table, propping her head up. Her neat eyebrows raised slightly, and for once, she looked surprised as her eyes pierced Subaru.

“That is quite a reckless statement. You were planning on capturing this city without spilling any blood? In the middle of a war, without overwhelming strength?”

“…That’s right. Got a problem with it? No, I guess so, since it failed in the end…”

“I was simply stunned by such an absurd concept. And all the more wondrous that such a fanciful idea was put into action. Are you in your right mind, Abel?”

“…The plan itself is certainly mad.”

Abel nodded, arms crossed as he answered Priscilla’s dubious question. However, Abel had accepted a plan that he did not think was sane and had put it into action. And Priscilla, who was apparently some old acquaintance of his, could not seem to understand that.

“How did you soften so much, looking out at the empire from the throne? There is nothing achieved in battle without sacrifice. Pride cannot be preserved without spilled blood. That is the imperial way.”

“I have no intention of turning my back on the way of the swordwolf. I said it was not a common plan, but there was a chance of success. In any event, were it not for Arakiya’s appearance, it would have succeeded.”

“_____”

“The failure was not in the plan; it was in my judgment. I will not have the plan put forward by my strategist mocked, not even by you. I sanctioned it. The responsibility lies with

me.”

Abel’s response was unexpected as he faced Priscilla down.

Strategist was a title and role Subaru could not ignore, but Abel was taking a clear stance, defending Subaru. He could not say anything as the two of them stared each other down.

“Wow, Bro. He must have really taken a shine to you. That’s a big step up in the world.” Al sidled up to Subaru.

“…Emilia-tan’s knight and Beako’s guardian are the only titles I need. I don’t want any more jobs I didn’t sign up for.”

He rejected the responsibility being pushed onto him.

With Abel covering for him, though, Priscilla’s focus had turned elsewhere, but that would not do anything for his aching heart.

No matter what he says, the responsibility for the lives lost should be with me. I’m the one who came up with the plan and put it into action.

“You can’t save everyone, Bro.”

Al fidgeted with a metal bit of his helmet, cutting deep into the discord in Subaru’s heart. Glancing over, Subaru saw Al was just looking up at the ceiling.

“People live, and people die. Everyone’s gotta take care of their own life. It’s not on you to take responsibility for other people.”

This was the cynicism that Al showed from time to time. And in truth, he was right. Subaru could not save everyone. If he decided to try, there would be no end to it, and he had not saved everyone all the time before this point, either.

But war was on a different scale. *—Is that really right? I might be able to save dozens, hundreds of lives with just a single choice.*

“This does not even rise to the level of a farce.”

Priscilla and Abel’s staredown continued apace, regardless of Subaru and Al. She pulled her fan from her

cleavage and pointed it all around the meeting room, gesturing to the entire city.

“This, even after successfully capturing the city with your strategist’s plan. Arakiya will not miraculously be driven back a second time. Nor will that method be possible again, will it?”

“Yes. There will be no second time.”

Abel nodded without hesitation.

Subaru furrowed his brow at the mention of how Arakiya was driven back. Arakiya had suddenly behaved strangely for a moment during her exchange with Al.

“Was that not something Al did?”

“Hmm? That wasn’t me. I mean, if it was me, I would’ve followed up with something better than getting knocked aside and almost falling, right?”

Now that you mention it, his follow-through was a bit weak.

Hearing their exchange, everyone in the room shifted their attention to Abel. If anyone had set something up in that moment, then he was the only option, but he just snorted in annoyance at the attention.

“Arakiya is a spirit eater. She consumes spirits in the air around her and absorbs their power.”

“A spirit……eater?”

Subaru’s eyes widened. It was an unfamiliar term, but it had a dangerous sound to it.

The rules in Volakia are different than in Lugunica. He had picked up that much through all of this, but a spirit eater was something entirely new and different.

I’m just a humble spirit master who borrows the power of spirits, but that phrase has an ominous ring to it, and to be blunt……

“I never want to introduce Beako to her… Are spirit eaters common?”

“Of course not. Spirit eating is a secret technique passed down only among a tribe that lived on the frontiers of

Volakia. Because of their extreme idiosyncrasy, they were wiped out, and the art of spirit eating was lost."

"To the extent of my knowledge, at least, there are no confirmed spirit eaters other than Arakiya. If there are any, they are being very carefully guarded. That is the observer… No, that is irrelevant at the moment." Not wanting to let the discussion be derailed, Abel shook his head. "Let us return to the topic at hand."

The discovery that spirit eaters were not, in fact, commonplace helped him stop worrying that Beatrice would get wolfed down.

"So then what? How did you mess with Arakiya?"

"I did not 'mess' with her. I simply made her mana-drunk."

"Mana-drunk…ha-ha-ha. I see. That's another damn skillful trick."

Al seemed to understand the answer. He touched his chin and nodded, like he was impressed. Meanwhile, "mana-drunk" did not really mean anything for Subaru.

"If I remember right, I think I did hear something about people who are sensitive to mana getting sick when they go places with crazy-thick mana density, but…"

"Because of her spirit eater nature, Arakiya is especially prone to those sorts of influences. However, since she absorbs spirits, her resistance is far removed from that of a normal person. In order to make Arakiya drunk…"

"Yes, I was forced to use a treasure. Including what was consumed by him," Abel said, jerking his chin toward Subaru, "I have reached the limits of my possessions."

Subaru furrowed his brow and cocked his head.

"Treasures? What? That's not ringing a bell."

"The ring you destroyed breaking the demon beast's horn during the Ritual of Blood."

"Ah…"

It had completely slipped Subaru's mind, but now that Abel mentioned it, he remembered borrowing a ring that

could use magic. In the confusion of the battle, he had punched the elgina's horn with the ring, causing an explosion. The demon beast's horn was broken, but in exchange, Subaru's arm and the ring were completely busted.

"While I made a show of bringing the balcony down with my foot, in truth I was crushing another ring. It took time for the mana contained to overflow enough to fully permeate the area, though…"

"Getting little Arakiya completely mana-drunk and wobbly. Though even then, she still had no trouble with me."

"You had a trick like that up your sleeve even then…?"

Everyone was completely battered and injured in that moment, but even cornered by one of the strongest in the entire empire, he was still searching for a way to come out on top. I have to tip my cap to his persistence.

By his own estimation, Subaru ranked pretty high up there in the "not giving up" rankings, but the gap in intelligence between him and Abel was too great. It was the difference between a pointless struggle and a do-or-die counterattack.

Either way…

"That was a plan you already had prepared for Arakiya, was it not? You would not know when she might come for you in your sleep, so you would prepare that sort of timid ploy."

"The closer someone is kept, the more important a countermeasure is in the event of hostilities breaking out… Particularly in Arakiya's case. It was a given that she would someday turn her fangs on me, was it not?"

"… However, a surprise attack will only work once. It is no simple feat to prepare more mana crystals capable of disorienting her. Before the next encounter, it will be necessary to gather a proper fighting force. However—"

Priscilla broke off there in a meaningful pause.

Covering her mouth with her opened fan, Priscilla's crimson eyes narrowed, staring down Abel. She seemed to be probing him, testing him. He exhaled slightly.

"So, things went according to plan up to recruiting the Shudrak… However, following the plan of a strategist prone to flights of fancy and to the foolish idea of invading Guaral…"

"_____"

"…I cannot possibly recommend my cooperator support you."

"What?!"

Subaru shouted at the plain, straightforward statement Priscilla made. He was not the only surprised one, though. Everyone there other than Abel and Al was stunned.

"Wait, wait, wait, this just skipped a bunch of steps! Cooperator…? We don't even know what your position is. I heard you came to help Abel, but…"

"I did no such thing. You would do well not to take my jester's words as truth."

"Fine, got it, sure! Then forget that part. Whether you came to help Abel or not isn't the important thing. What I want to know is what your real goal is here."

As had been discussed already, her more immediate goal was to talk to Abel, but what Subaru wanted to know was what Priscilla, Al, and whatever other people they had apparently brought were doing in Volakia.

"Tell me. And be honest. What I and everyone else think about you is riding on this."

"Hah, such conceit. As if I care what the likes of you think of me. Whatever you might think, I will do as I please. Since—"

"The world is made for your convenience, yeah, I know."

Priscilla snorted as Subaru repeated the by-now-familiar philosophy that she espoused.

"My goal is to return the emperor driven from the throne back to his seat. If he is not returned, noisome visitors will

continue appearing before me without end.”

“It goes without saying, but those were not sent by my order.”

“I do not doubt it. Thus, I allowed myself to be carried here on a wing.”

Priscilla closed an eye as she looked up, gesturing not so much to the ceiling as to the night sky beyond it.

Or more to the point, not just to the sky, but to certain creatures that laid claim to it…

“Did you and Al leap down from the sky?”

“The flying dragon express. Honestly, I thought the world was gonna end when the princess leaped off by herself. I didn’t get off until later in the descent.”

Flying dragons… I was surprised by the water dragons in Pristella, too, but……

In addition to land dragons, there were fantastical water dragons and also flying dragons.

From what he had heard, they were especially ferocious, and it took specialist knowledge to tame them. There weren’t a lot of those specialists, though, so it was rare for anyone to ride a flying dragon.

“Meaning Priscilla’s cooperator is someone capable of ordering a flying dragon express delivery.”

“Do not play games with my words. In your case, it reveals vulgarity rather than wisdom. Polish your charm. You would be less unsightly if you fixed your makeup.”

“Telling me to fix my face here? Now? There’s something wrong with your head…”

He had expected that not being able to change into more normal clothes itself would have been viewed as a problem, but the people here could read the mood and had not commented on it.

Either way, the discussion has gotten off the rails again…

“So if your goal is to return Abel to the throne, then is it fair to understand that we could work together?”

“I cannot simply say yes to that question. I have not

forgotten what was just said. If this man does not possess the capacity to rule, then there is no meaning in restoring him.”

Priscilla’s eyes sharpened as she directly questioned Abel’s qualifications. She took issue with the plan for a bloodless siege that Subaru had proposed and Abel had accepted—not because it had failed, but because of its fundamental conceit.

In true Volakian style, naïveté was considered fatal. And there had, in fact, been lives lost due to Subaru’s half-hearted planning.

I can’t deny her misgivings. But……

“I will retake my throne. Whatever anyone might say, that is absolute. Even you, Priscilla.”

Abel firmly responded as Subaru fell silent. There was as much fire in those words as when he had revealed his identity to Subaru and declared he would take back this country. Perhaps even more.

“_____”

Once they heard the determination in his voice, everyone’s expressions changed. It ignited a fighting spirit in Kuna and Holly, who would follow him, as would the rest of the Shudrak. Zikr lowered his head, as if in the presence of a divine being. Al turned, curious to see Priscilla’s reaction. Her eyes narrowed at being so bluntly rejected.

“Your spirit is unbowed but at odds with reality. You are driven from the throne at present, are you not?”

“_____”

“The circumstances are known. The problem is, who set this in motion? Who planned it?”

“…Prime Minister Belstetz must have laid the groundwork.”

Hostility ignited in Abel’s black eyes when he answered her question.

The prime minister was the role that managed a country’s governance and effectively stood at the top while

serving as the emperor's close aide. Just as a grand marshal would be the highest military office, it could be considered the highest civil office.

Either way, it's effectively the number-two position, and an easy place to pull off a betrayal.

"That ancient tree? A bold choice to use a legacy of Lamia."

"Of course, I was aware of his rebellious spirit and made many preparations. However…"

Abel paused there, quietly exhaling.

It was unlike him, and for the first time, he showed some emotion. The man who had been unshaken as emperor despite being driven from the throne for the first time wavered ever so slightly.

The reason for that was not the minister who betrayed him, but…

"I did not suspect the one I set to watch him…… The Fourth of the Nine Divine Generals, Chisha Gold."

"Impossible! General First-Class Chisha?!"

Zikr immediately raised his voice in shock. As a general second-class of the imperial army, he had apparently been close to this Divine General whose name meant nothing to Subaru. As attention shifted to Zikr, he touched his bountiful hair.

"General First-Class Chisha is one of the most distinctive members of the Nine Divine Generals. He is more famed for his wise strategies than for his martial prowess, and he was the greatest backer of His Highness in the imperial selection ceremony…"

"So then he's like his right hand? You were betrayed by your top political right hand guy the prime minister *and* your trusted right-hand general who supported you the longest?"

"Don't be ridiculous. My right hand is attached to my body."

"That just sounds like whistling past the graveyard at

this point.”

Subaru was surprised by Abel’s unexpectedly lacking popularity.

From all I’ve heard about Volakia’s extreme beliefs, maybe it isn’t such a rare thing for an emperor viewed as lacking in power to be immediately overthrown, though.

“Is it a common thing for an emperor to have to run away in this country?”

“Since I took the throne, this is just the second time.”

“‘Second? So it’s happened before!”

“Fool. It was royal guards of Lugunica who dragged me around. If you have a complaint, then address it to them.”

Subaru was getting tired of playing the straight man, so he kept his mouth shut this time, seeing that Abel was looking genuinely vexed.

Oh, yeah, Julius mentioned something about being sent to Volakia as an envoy. I hope that isn’t what this is about. If it is, then it really is a small world.

“Ah, so the emperor was driven off by his trusted retainer and closest aide, and little Arakiya turned on him, too… Isn’t that pretty bad? Do you not have any allies?”

“The Divine General Goz Ralphone… He did everything in his power to let me escape. Were it not for that, I would not have been able to activate the transport mechanism.”

“Ooh! Of course, General First-Class Goz…!”

“However, if all the other Nine have turned, then I cannot know how far Goz was able to resist alone. It is likely he fell in the fighting.”

A Divine General who risked his life to protect Abel was a hopeful idea, but it was apparently a fleeting hope. However, Zikr shook his head.

“Pardon me, but no, sir. I have not received any reports of General First-Class Goz’s death. Whether in combat or otherwise, his death is not one that could be hidden for long.”

“In that case, he may well be imprisoned,” Abel said.

“Most likely. Nay, I am sure of it! It is General Goz, after all!”

Zikr saluted respectfully.

If he has that sort of respect from Zikr, this Goz person must be something. Or, despite the rugged name, this Goz is a woman.

Before Subaru could ask a pointless question, though—

“If the prime minister and Nine Divine Generals are the enemy, then the empire is near death,” Priscilla murmured.

While he agreed with the sentiment, Subaru raised his hand.

“Hey, it’s a bit late to ask this now, but what if Abel just announced himself as the emperor? If you do that, then the traitors trying to run the government from the capital will…”

“Sorry, Bro, but you’re pinning your hopes on the wrong horse if you think the people and army will rise up and overthrow the coup government in a bloody revolution.”

“I wasn’t thinking quite that violently. But why?”

“This is the Empire of Volakia, where those with strength are respected,” Abel answered. The emperor driven from his throne crossed his arms and furrowed his brow slightly. “Were I to announce myself and declare my intention to reclaim the capital, it would be welcomed. However, it would not garner me any support. ‘Take back that which was stolen.’ That is the way in this country.”

“So it’s not just property or land. The imperial throne is…”

“No exception. And thus, what I must do is settled.”

Subaru wanted to shrink into a ball with how boxed in they were, so he was surprised by Abel’s response. Even though it felt like they were at a dead end, he made it sound like the opposite. Abel stood up and put his hand down on the round table.

“General Second-Class Zikr, a map.”

“Right away, sir!”

Zikr immediately gave an order to a soldier waiting on standby in a corner of the room. The soldier took down the map on the wall of the room and spread it out on the table. It was a world map.

“We are in the east, and Guaral is here. The capital, Lupghana, that must be retaken is approximately in the middle of the empire.”

“…Volakia’s pretty big.”

Seeing it all on the map brought into perspective the hazy idea Subaru had of just how large this land was.

This world had four major countries that controlled sections of the continent, but Volakia, covering the south of the map, was larger than any of the other three. The Badheim Jungle that they had struggled to escape was just a small part of the whole of Volakia.

“The cities of Volakia are managed by their respective mayors and lords. Guaral is no exception. Every city maintains its own autonomous force and will not hesitate to fight in the event of an emergency. I will bring them under my command and gather a force capable of reclaiming the capital.”

“…I can already see how this is gonna go from playing strategy games.”

“You have an objection.”

“Of course. Just Guaral was this big a job. I can’t imagine it all going smoothly.”

Subaru managed to somehow keep up as Abel explained things while pointing to the map. He could keep up, but that was just in a logical sense. Emotionally speaking was another matter.

This is reality, not a game. Maybe in an RPG, there would be a way to make it work, but I can’t imagine it actually working in reality.

However—

“There is a means to allay your concerns. In fact, it is a prerequisite for me to do what must be done.”

“A prerequisite…”

“Securing the Nine Divine Generals.”

Subaru’s eyes widened at that.

Of course. Didn’t Abel just say it was the betrayal of the Nine Divine Generals that drove him from the throne?

The one of the Nine known to be reliable was out of contact, and two were known to be enemies. As for the rest…

“The other Nine Divine Generals…?”

“That’s right.”

Abel nodded as Subaru wavered. Then, looking around the room to everyone else—

“‘Citizens of the Empire, be strong.’ The Nine Divine Generals are the manifestation of that creed. In other words, if one wishes to dominate the Empire of Volakia, one must gather the Nine.”

“Which means…”

Subaru’s eyes opened as he tracked what Abel was getting at. Abel’s expression shifted at Subaru’s reaction, forming a belligerent smile.

“Cecils Segmund, The Blue Lightning. Spirit Eater Arakiya. Vicious Old Man Orbart Dankelken, White Spider Chisha Gold. Lion Knight Goz Ralphone. Curse Tool Master Groovy Gumlet. Yoruna Mishigure the Flamboyant. Moguro Hagane the Steelman, and the Flying Dragon Commander Madelyn Eschert.”

“This battle will be won by the side that gathers more of the Nine Divine Generals. That is the plan for victory and the necessary task laid out before me.”

2

The victory condition for stealing the throne: the Nine

Divine Generals.

Subaru could feel the tension in the air on his skin as he heard the names and titles of the Nine Divine Generals necessary for that victory.

"…If this was a manga or anime, I'd be getting hyped for the big name lineup."

When it was something you were experiencing directly, though, it was hardly ever something you could enjoy like that.

The names and aliases of the Nine Generals, from Spirit Eater Arakiya to the rest, were more than enough to evoke images of people who were incredibly dangerous to deal with.

"…If gathering those scary generals is the key to victory, as you say, then there's something I want to ask."

"What? Is there something left to question?"

Abel raised an eyebrow pretentiously as he stood, hands on the map laid out over the table.

If he thinks he's explained everything, then that's a peak wise man not knowing how to just speak in normal words. Especially since I know a whole lot less about the empire than everyone else here.

"There's a lot of room left for questions. Skipping out on explanations because you know what you're talking about just means everyone around you is left wondering what the hell you're thinking."

"I will choose to interpret that as your attempt at advice and let it pass. Speak."

"Don't just let it pass, take it to heart…"

Subaru sighed at Abel's crossed arms and magnanimous response, and then, feeling the attention of the room shift to him, he made up his mind.

"All right." He held up nine fingers. "The Nine Divine Generals. We're lucky it's easy to compare, since it's an odd number, but there's one friendly one who's missing, and Arakiya and this Chisha guy are confirmed enemies. That's

already a disadvantage.”

Five or more needed to be convinced to achieve a majority. Meanwhile, the other side had already nabbed two, and to make matters worse, this Goz person who had helped Abel might not even be alive, so the one person they could count on for sure could just be gone.

“First of all, I don’t even know how this whole Nine Divine Generals system works, exactly. From the sound of it, it’s nine different generals, each reporting directly to the emperor, but it’s not like they are all just on reserve in the capital, right?”

“Generals first-class are the cornerstone of the empire. Simply look at the pointlessly large expanse of the country. Central though it may be, it would be impossible to respond swiftly to an emergency were they all in the capital.”

“Indeed. It has decreased dramatically under His Highness’s rule, but there is still no end to the smoldering flames of internal strife in the empire. The order cannot be maintained by simply guarding the capital.”

“Meaning these nine generals we’re trying to gather are scattered all over the place, then?”

Subaru put a hand to his chin, grasping Priscilla’s and Zikr’s extra explanation.

Using an example a little more familiar, in Lugunica, Roswaal has that impressive-sounding title of western marquis, and he apparently has a duty to ride to the aid of the kingdom if there’s ever any trouble. And of course, he has permission to raise and maintain a personal army. Though in Roswaal’s case, he could probably deal with most problems by flying in and dropping a big fireball from the sky rather than by mustering soldiers.

“Put that way, he’s a pretty broken unit to have on the board… I’m a little curious how he’d end up compared to the Nine here.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, but aren’t you getting off track, Natsumi?”

“Sorry. Anyway, if they’re all around the country, then it’s safe to assume they weren’t all involved in the coup d’état, right? There is actually some room for negotiation, right?”

“So far as I can see, that is a reasonable belief.”

Abel nodded, confirming Subaru’s thoughts.

Honestly, that’s not exactly reassuring, coming from a guy who’s apparently pretty unpopular, but if no one else is commenting on it, I guess that can be accepted for now.

Either way, it sounded like they had dodged the guaranteed-failure scenario of all Nine being decided already.

“At least the worst outcome’s out of the question… So then, a follow-up question, but if there is a hierarchy to the Nine, then it would be safe to assume that the ones higher on the chart should be prioritized, right?”

“Yes, that understanding is correct.”

“Then going to the person who could be compared to Reinhard—Cecils, was it?—would be the textbook play…or more like, wouldn’t that just settle everything?”

One of the four strongest people in the world, whose name was known through all four lands. *If Cecils is someone who could be mentioned in the same breath as Reinhard, then wouldn’t he be someone who could settle this fight all by himself?*

Subaru did actually think that Reinhard might just be able to win even if he fought everyone in Lugunica by himself, so if Cecils was on the same level, then that might be some hope, but…

“…If he could be secured, then that would indeed settle the question of combat strength in one fell swoop.”

“And yet you’re making a bitter face for some reason.”

Abel’s expression, brow furrowed as he answered Subaru’s question, was poor. Subaru was bewildered by the disconnect, and seeing that, Abel sighed slightly.

“The reason securing the Nine Divine Generals is the condition for success is that their exploits and prowess will

bring the obedience of most soldiers and officers. The more of the Nine who can be brought under my banner, the greater the army that will follow. Understand?”

“…? Yeah, I understand. Since you should side with the strongest person. Or is the whole ‘empire’s strongest’ thing fake?”

“There is nothing false in describing him as the strongest of the empire. However, there is a problem.”

“A problem?”

“—He has no esteem.”

That statement, which Abel had held back so much, caused Subaru’s mind to blank for a moment. He wondered what the problem could be as he let the words soak into his head, carefully digesting them.

“Are you one to talk?”

“It is a fact. He sits above the other generals first-class of the empire as One, but he has no authority. Even should he be granted authority, he would be unable to use it. All he can do is cut down people.”

“Don’t make someone like that a general!”

“Now, now, calm down, Bro! That’s just a Volakian custom; there’s no helping it!”

Subaru erupted at that description of Cecils, but Al cocked his head and laid his arm across Subaru’s shoulders, holding him back with just one arm.

“Real talk, he hasn’t been given anything other than the title. Just giving him some authority without thinking might end with him being manipulated by who knows who.”

“Of course. That man must not be used by anyone other than me. If there were any danger of that, I would have had him dealt with long ago.”

“But you were all alone without support in the jungle…!”

Abel was talking like he held the reins, but the reality of the situation was telling a very different story.

And can I really accept that in Volakia, where strength is hailed above all, the person known as the strongest in the

entire empire wouldn't command any popularity?

"What do you have to say about this, Zikr?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you, sir. Please, as an officer and general of Volakia, I would like to hear your candid opinion. What do you think of this General First-Class Cecils?"

"Ah, well." Zikr crossed his short arms in thought. "First of all, General Cecils is, without a doubt, the cornerstone of the country's defense and a symbol of Volakia's strength. A manifestation of the exhortation to all Volakians to be strong."

"Oh, that's a good start, isn't it? And?"

"On a personal level, he is free-spirited and amicable and treats everyone alike with good cheer. Putting everything together…"

"Yes…?"

"General Cecils is a monster that most officers and soldiers struggle to understand, who cannot be reasoned with and is broadly feared. His Highness's judgment is correct, I believe."

"Where'd that come from?!"

Even Zikr, who had only ever been amicable, had to carefully choose his words. The deep furrows in his brow and his pained expression made it clear that was his genuine belief.

Meaning…

"Simply securing the First of the Nine and lazily using him to tilt the balance will not be sufficient. Even if you rack what little brain you have, there is no worthwhile idea to be had."

"Gimme a break! Don't blame me for his weird reputation! Also, if the emperor and the top general have no popularity, then it's not really that surprising a coup happened, is it?"

"How many times will you repeat this? Do not presume your disrespect will be overlooked forever."

Exposed to Priscilla's and Abel's sharp gazes, Subaru stuck out his tongue at both of them.

But my idea has completely crumbled. If securing the Nine Divine Generals is about gathering fighting strength, then there's no point hurrying to recruit the one guy with no support for our side.

"Actually, if he's that unpopular, then maybe he should just be left alone entirely…?"

"That would be a problem, too. He has the strength to shift the outcome of the entire battle depending on the situation. Even should we secure all of the remaining Nine, there is a real possibility he would still be able to take my head."

"Damn, that's hard to deal with! Doesn't that make him a giant pain in the ass?!"

It was only now, in a far-off land, that he really understood how amazing Reinhard was to have both strength and humanity all in one package.

I wonder if I shouted his name at the top of my lungs, would he come running even across the border?

"To be clear, commoner, the Sword Saint cannot cross the border due to treaties between our countries. It would be wise not to hold out pointless hope."

"Quit reading my mind. And I wasn't seriously thinking it… Besides, only counting on someone when you're in trouble isn't what real pals do."

Even if he would come running, relying on him out of convenience wouldn't be right.

Subaru figured there might come a day so dire that he couldn't afford to hold onto such noble ideals, but until that day came, Subaru was prepared to hold on to his beliefs.

"So, then, commoner who is being treated as Abel's strategist, are your questions exhausted?"

"They aren't, and I'm not his strategist, either, but the first part at least is…huh?"

Subaru grimaced at Priscilla's question. After answering,

he started to move the conversation on, when…

“Ms. Natsumi and the chief! Pardon me!”

…a cheerful voice rang out as the door opened, and a new figure burst into the room. It was Flop, wearing a blue outfit, his long blond hair gallantly flowing behind him. Attention centered on him as he nodded, seeing Subaru and Abel. He had been helping with the treatment of the wounded up on the top floor, where the scars of Arakiya’s attack remained…

“Flop! How is everyone’s treatment going?”

“Everything’s settled down now! …Hmm… Should I call you ‘buddy’ instead of ‘Ms. Natsumi’ right now? It kind of feels like I should switch back to that.”

“Umm, whichever is fine. But…has everything really calmed down…?”

Accepting Flop’s slightly unexpected consideration, Subaru felt a mixture of relief and concern as he learned the healing had reached a break. He was afraid that more names would join the list of sacrifices caused by his plan’s failure.

“No one died, buddy.”

“Eh…”

“Everyone was in pretty rough shape, though. But thanks to your missus and niece working hard… Ms. Talitta and Ms. Utakata’s promptness also helped a lot. And of course, my sister and I did our part, too!”

Flop answered firmly, head held high, as if perceiving the core of Subaru’s concern. He gallantly pointed to himself proudly while talking about his contribution. His answer was compact, so it took Subaru a moment to grasp the information contained and break it down.

“No deaths… Hah.”

“Yes. It’s all thanks to you doing everything you could to keep everyone alive. As for me, if my sister hadn’t been there, I might have hit my head and died! Ha-ha-ha! I’m never going to be able to look her in the eye!”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right. I won’t, either…”

Seeing Flop’s lighthearted smile, Subaru looked down, and his shoulders trembled.

That was how he really, truly felt. If Medium, or really anyone, had not been there, there was no way he would have been able to hear such a happy report about those who needed treatment.

Lives were lost, but there are also lives that were saved.

It brought a powerful emotion to his heart…

“Merchant, what of the healer?”

Ignoring Subaru’s emotions, Abel broke into the conversation with a dispassionate tone. Subaru furrowed a brow at that unfamiliar word. Flop seemed to have the same thought……

“Do you mean…his missus?”

“Who else is there? Or are you saying there was someone other than her who could use healing magic?”

“No, I can’t think of anyone else! Just…”

“Just?”

“Chief, wouldn’t it be a bit better to say it in a way that encourages people to have a better impression of you? If you’re going to address someone, focusing more on being easily approachable makes things move smoother!”

Abel raised an eyebrow at that blunt and cheerful criticism delivered straight to his face. Flop was something to be able to say it so brazenly, but it was anxiety-inducing for anyone listening nearby. Of course, Subaru did not appreciate Rem being addressed by her functional utility, either.

“You feeling that way is rich after your performance earlier, Bro.”

“Considering everything along the way, I have the right to say at least that much…in which case, Flop does, too, I guess?”

“I dunno, but I’m sure curious about what sort of experiences you all shared.”

It was too turbulent to be discussed now, and it would have to wait for another time.

Whatever Abel's manner of address, though, Rem's safety was still Subaru's highest priority. Of course, he had already confirmed for himself that she did not have any obvious external injuries.

"She didn't collapse from overexertion, did she?"

"You don't need to worry there, buddy. She's quite exhausted, though. But not so much that a good rest won't cure her. You're a lucky man to have such a hardworking wife."

"Really…That's good to hear."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Subaru felt better upon hearing Flop's assessment.

The situation was what it was. It was a position where he had no choice but to rely on Rem, but he had genuinely been scared she might push herself too hard. No matter what he said, though, there was no way the current Rem would listen to him in this situation.

"…Missus?"

Al whispered as Subaru touched his chest. He had his hand on the chin of his helmet and was cocking his head.

"I'm pretty sure I didn't see her up there, but is the other cutie from your side here, too?"

"The what…? You mean Emilia-tan? No, she isn't here. That would be really reassuring if she was…though I feel like I also wouldn't really want that, either."

Emilia's gentle nature would mix with Volakia's way of life like oil and water. There was always the chance that Emilia might appreciate the feel of the imperial way, since she had a tendency to resolve things by brute force, but Volakia's ruthlessness was on a different level altogether.

Volakia wouldn't suit her.

"Another wife, huh," Al murmured, hand still on his chin.

"…To be clear, that's just the story we are using for convenience's sake," Subaru explained. "Though if I'm

being honest, she's someone I consider equally precious. I'm going to bring her back, no matter what it takes."

Since they were both in Volakia, there was no worry about Al spreading weird rumors, but he didn't want any unfair aspersions cast on himself. It would hurt his determination.

"Effeminate man—'merchant,' did he call you?—are you one of Abel's subordinates, too?"

"Mrgh, not really a subordinate. My sister and I have ended up cooperating with the chief here and my buddy over there due to circumstances. I guess you could say I'm his newest friend!"

"Hoh, a friend."

Priscilla's lips loosened at Flop's answer. Hiding them with her fan, she turned a meaningful gaze toward Abel.

"To think you were diligently building friendships while I was away. I can see how the throne of Volakia has become quite easily vacated."

"Spare me your sarcasm. And I have no recollection of that man and myself becoming friends."

"What are you saying, Chief?! We toed the line between life and death together while cross-dressing, didn't we!"

"Surviving deadly encounters together is enough to make a friend? In that case, every soldier in the imperial army is my friend. And the one who was closest to me through every danger is my enemy."

It was a perfect counterargument, considering the position they were in, and Flop clammed up.

But it was also a double-edged argument that Abel could not use and remain unscathed, either.

"Anyway, Flop brought us some good news. I was looking forward to a nicer subject, so…"

"—Wait."

"…What?"

A happy subject for a conference that was not particularly constructive. Subaru tried to use that as a

springboard, but Abel interrupted him, jerking his chin toward Flop. Guided by that gesture, Subaru looked toward Flop, too.

“Flop?”

He noticed the change in expression that had caused Abel to call him out.

Flop never failed to have a bright and cheerful expression, maintaining a sunny demeanor throughout it all, but just now, there was a faint trace of hesitation and grief in his eyes.

“If you are a merchant, you should be more careful in how you move a topic along. In that regard, I cannot imagine you are suited to be a merchant.”

“I’ve heard that a fair number of times, and I have my own thoughts about it, but I’ll set them aside for now… Buddy, what I said before is not quite a complete report.”

After Flop glanced briefly at Abel, his long eyelashes swayed anxiously as he turned to look at Subaru.

The earnestness in his charming face made Subaru’s chest ache. Though he did not want to hear what came next, he could not avoid it.

In that sense, Flop had a natural genius for speaking with someone. If it were not for the situation, Subaru would have told him it was a talent he would do well to use as a merchant.

But…

“It affects you, too, Chief. And Ms. Kuna and Ms. Holly, too. Could you come with me?”

Right now, unable to interrupt Flop’s announcement, it was a bitter genius that Subaru cursed.

3

“Abel and Natsumi?”

Heeding Flop’s request, they had left the meeting room

and gone up to the top floor of the building.

The wounded were all gathered, and the space looked like a field hospital, where they were greeted by Mizelda, whose scorched black hair had been cut short evenly all around.

She had been the most badly wounded in Arakiya's assault. No matter how robust her constitution, her life force and Rem's healing ability—when she was not in peak form—were both put to a dire test.

"Sorry to call you out. But I thought it was important to say this as soon as possible."

"Mizelda…"

Mizelda smiled faintly, sitting on a curio set against the wall.

The smile that the powerful Amazon had for them was lacking the hint of wild ferocity she had shown them so many times before, but that powerful gaze was undimmed. It was curiously unbalanced.

"First, I should say I was saved because of Rem. It was a miracle."

"…"

"The town was captured splendidly, too. As chief of the Shudrak, I am impressed by your efforts. Because of that, and for the sake of the coming battle, I have to say this."

Mizelda sat up straight, praising Rem's dedication and Subaru's contributions. And then—

"I yield the position of chief to my sister, Talitta. I can no longer fulfill its duties."

She touched her right leg, which had been lost below the knee.

"_____"

Her expression was undaunted as she made the declaration. The feral, powerful eyes and beautiful face still glowed with a dominating aura, unchanged from when Subaru first laid eyes on her. In every way, she gave the impression of a strong and powerful woman. Yet, even as

she maintained that image, she made the decision to retire from the position of chief after losing her right leg.

Those close to Mizelda, the Shudrak who knew her strength firsthand, felt a deep regret. Their feelings of loss would not be easily washed away.

Kuna, usually gruff, had a blank look, and Holly, who always took everything at her own pace, appeared to be in low spirits. Utakata bit her lip and looked down, tears in her eyes, and the other Shudrak all had similarly gloomy looks.

However, the one who was most upset was…

“S-Sister, you can’t. I couldn’t possibly…”

“—Talitta.”

“This is your role! I don’t have the ability to…”

Talitta shook her head, pleading like a child.

She had been directly named by Mizelda as the next chief, but she loved and looked up to her older sister. From their day-to-day interactions, it was clear she almost worshipped her. Mizelda losing her leg may well have shaken Talitta even more than Mizelda herself.

“…I was not strong enough.”

A feeble voice filled with self-reproach answered Talitta’s pained plea. Rem, exhausted and leaning on her cane, stood in a corner of the floor filled with the wounded. As the one and only person here capable of using healing magic, Rem had been constantly running here and there to save all she could. The blood in her hair and staining her clothes, and the deep exhaustion clear on her face, spoke to how difficult it had been.

Who could possibly blame her after seeing her like that?

And so…

“You do not need to worry. I was lucky to only lose a leg fighting a general of Volakia… No, it was only with all your help that I even made it this far.”

“Mizelda…but I…”

“I am grateful to you. There is nothing else that needs to

be said.”

When Mizelda made a point of thanking her again, Rem did not press it further.

Louis, her long blond hair a mess, moved close, standing beside Rem. When she gently held Rem’s sleeve, Rem quietly put a hand on Louis’s shoulder and looked down.

The self-blame and sense of powerlessness were something Subaru understood painfully well, but before he could say anything, the handsome black-haired man stepped forward.

“Mizelda, you have no intention of changing your mind, do you?”

Mizelda nodded at Abel. Touching the bandage covering where the amputation had been made—

“No. The covenant between the Shudrak and the Volakian emperor will be kept. Whatever is next, you should discuss with Talitta…no, with the chief.”

“… Understood. You did well, Mizelda. A great deed.”

Abel accepted Mizelda’s resolve to step down with a meek expression. Seeing that, Mizelda chuckled and broke into a grin.

“Why not try smiling? That’s a handsome man’s responsibility.”

“…Hmph.”

“That’s enough.”

Even though she had just lost a leg, Mizelda was too strong. Even as haughty and arrogant as Abel was, he smirked without criticizing her disrespect. It was the ultimate proof that the emperor, stripped of his throne, respected the female warrior raised in the jungle.

And…

“Hear me, fellow Shudrak!”

Growing more serious, Mizelda raised her face and her voice. Hearing her fierce tone, the Shudrak immediately stood straight, as one, listening carefully.

“As I have declared, I can no longer fulfill the role of

chief! And so I am yielding the position to my younger sister, Talitta! Everyone, heed Talitta's words!"

"_____"

"That is my final order as chief. And so we give thanks to our forebears' vow and our ancestors' pride!"

""We give our thanks.""

The Shudrak answered Mizelda's call.

Subaru did not know their customs, but even an outsider like him could grasp that it was a succession ceremony of sorts. It was short, without pomp and circumstance. A passing of the torch that combined practicality and idealism. Here, in that moment, the chiefdom of the Shudrak passed from Mizelda to Talitta.

"Sister…"

"Don't look down, Chief. Your doubts are our doubts. Your hesitation is our hesitation. Your death is our death."

Mizelda encouraged the new chief, Talitta, who stepped forward with a downcast expression.

It would not make Talitta suddenly feel better, but Talitta also understood that clinging to her sister would not improve the situation, either.

After a few moments' silence, Talitta gave a tentative nod.

"_____"

There was a complex emotion in Mizelda's eyes as she watched her sister, but Talitta, with her head downcast, could not see it. And it was something that no one else could intrude upon to put into words.

4

With the transfer of power and casualty report over—

"…Honestly, I'm surprised," Subaru said.

Abel furrowed his brow at being called out.

“Regarding what? I have much to consider. Do not add further complications.”

“Don’t be so prickly over everything… It was just surprising how readily you accepted Mizelda’s decision to leave the front lines.”

“_____”

“I would have pegged you for the type to say, ‘It’s just one leg; you’re not getting out of work that easy.’”

Though Subaru understood that he wasn’t being very fair, that was exactly the sort of thing he expected from Abel. In addition to adding the Shudrak to his forces to reclaim the throne, he had even considered poisoning all of Guaral. He figured that Abel, or rather, Vincent Volakia, would not hesitate to make any cruel choice.

“Fool,” Abel immediately retorted. “What meaning would there be in such compulsion?”

Despite being prepared for a verbal lashing, Subaru got a rather calm reply. He hesitated while Abel looked at the Shudrak speaking together.

“In the first place, I do not desire more from my subordinates than they can achieve. I might demand the best of their abilities, but to demand more than that is absurdity.”

“_____”

“Going above and beyond my expectations would simply disrupt my calculations. I desire neither more nor less. Mizelda performed admirably in her realm of expertise. All I have for her is a reward.”

Words to inspire, rewards to draw out results beyond a person’s natural ability, and promising more next time as a show of appreciation. Subaru had just assumed that was how people with authority got their subordinates to follow orders, so Abel’s response was the polar opposite of his expectations.

Asking nothing more than the best of a subordinate’s

abilities.

In one sense, that would be a comfortable work environment, but also really lonely.

“Of course, results not in line with expectations are rewarded with punishments. You understand the concept of just deserts.”

“…What, does that mean you are going to punish me?”

“If you were my subordinate, it would mean that. But are you my subordinate?”

Subaru’s eyes widened as Abel faced him head-on and looked him in the eye.

He, of course, had no recollection of becoming Abel’s subordinate. During the discussion with Priscilla, Abel had treated Subaru as a strategist, but he did not intend to formally appoint him.

“I won’t say the title doesn’t hold any appeal, but I’ll have to beg off being your subordinate.”

“Indeed. Then you are not my subordinate and are thus not within the bounds of punishment.”

“Now that you mention it, what *is* our relationship…?”

They were effectively forced to work together through circumstance, but there was no bond of subordination, and they had not really built any friendlier sort of relationship, either. By the flow of events, their fates had been joined, that was all, and when the problem had been resolved, they would take different roads.

We’re not allies or comrades-in-arms or anything like that. The most I could say is comrades-in-dresses.

“He may have thoughtlessly called me a friend, but you would not.”

“Yeah, I’m shy and have trouble making friends.”

Anyone who could call him a friend in a situation like this was either a saint or a swindler. Flop just happened to be the former, that was all.

And…

“I have a discussion to continue with Priscilla. You take

care of your domain.”

“My…?”

“You do not need me to say it.”

Torn into by those almond eyes, Subaru looked around. He quickly spotted Rem sitting there on the ground. She was looking down, so he could not see for sure, but considering her apologies earlier, he could not leave her alone at a time like this.

It pisses me off that Abel had to be the one to say it, though……

“Don’t get into it with Priscilla and start another fight, please. Just watch how you say things.”

“Most people would warn you that those words would be better heeded by you than by me.”

With those last verbal jabs, Subaru split up with Abel, who returned to the meeting room.

The Shudrak would change with the changing of their chief. Abel would have several things he needed to discuss with Priscilla. There would not be many scenes that needed Subaru there.

He would do better to prioritize the conversation that only he could have.

Taking a deep breath and calming himself, he spoke up.

“Got a moment, Rem?”

Rem was sitting with her back against the wall, her legs resting to the side. She twisted her body a bit, and he could see himself reflected faintly in her pale blue eyes.

“…How long are you planning to remain dressed like that?”

“You’re more important than me getting changed. I can do that as soon as we’re done here.”

“Is that so? In that case, we are done here. Please go change.”

“Oh, come on!”

Rem was curt, leaving no space for Subaru to work with. But when he shouted—

“Be quiet,” she shot back with a sharp gaze, nodding at the girl leaning against her left shoulder. “You will wake up Louis. Have some consideration… Or do you refuse to provide even that much consideration to this child?”

“You didn’t have to say that. I’m sorry.”

Louis was sleeping softly, leaning against Rem. Her white clothes were stained with blood, too, and he had heard she had helped Rem while she used her healing magic. According to Utakata, she had even done what she was told, albeit clumsily.

Of course, that just left Subaru with some complicated feelings.

“Such a grim expression while you are dressed like that is distracting.”

“Hnn? Ah, sorry. The makeup’s a mess, too. I’m sure I’m unsightly.”

“You were unsightly even when the makeup was properly applied.”

“Ugh…”

Subaru slumped at Rem’s standard barbed commentary, and then he slowly sat down next to Rem, on the right, opposite Louis. Rem flashed a reproachful glance, but he pointedly ignored it.

“Rem, you did great. Everyone was saved, thanks to you.”

“…It was a keen lesson in my inadequacy. Frankly, it’s pathetic.”

“Rem…”

Rem looked bitterly down at her hands. Staring at her white fingers, Rem weakly bit her lip.

“It is not pathetic at all. Even with your memories hazy, you’ve become able to use proper healing magic and managed to help a lot of people. And yet…”

“I know. This is not how magic is supposed to be.”

“What do you mean by that…?”

“Healing magic. I am using this magic by feel. Put simply, it is a home-cooked ability. Louis is assisting me, allowing it to somehow properly take form, but…”

Rem did not continue. When voiced, whining was like a poison that hurt yourself and others, but it could also be the slightest relief for a heavy heart. And Rem was loath to lighten her burden.

It was plain to see that she blamed herself, her weakness, for failing to save everyone.

“_____”

And Subaru understood that torturous feeling painfully well. The regret, the feeling like you could have done something more—those pained him far more than some wall he could not reach. All the more so when it affected someone’s future, especially someone other than himself.

Rem looked at Subaru with damp eyes and trembling lips, voicing an emotion she had not yet felt.

“What…what would have happened if it had been the prior me?”

“…When you had your memories?”

“Yes. With the healing magic I had then, would Mizelda…”

…have been able to keep her leg?

Subaru closed his eyes at those unspoken words. It was not as if he did not understand her feelings. But he could not really know how much of an influence Rem’s memories would have had on the effects of her healing magic.

“_____”

Rem looked at him with earnest eyes. He did not know if he could give her the answer she wanted. He had two choices: yes or no.

Which one would save Rem…no, which would cause her the least pain?

“…I think even with your memories, there probably was nothing more that could be done.”

“_____”

“Healing magic can’t do everything. And I am sure you did the best that you could.”

After racking his brain for several seconds that felt far longer in his head, that was his answer.

Even if she had had her memories and was performing her healing magic in optimal condition, he doubted she would have managed to save Mizelda’s leg.

Whether that is actually true, I don’t know.

Once hypotheticals started, they never ended. The fact here was that Rem had not been able to save Mizelda’s leg. But she had saved Mizelda’s life and the lives of many other people. That outcome was something to be praised. She had done nothing to merit reproach.

If there’s anyone to blame, then……

“I wasn’t good enough.”

“Eh…”

“My thinking was too shallow. I should have investigated everything more carefully.”

Rem’s round eyes widened at Subaru’s answer. Subaru gritted his teeth and covered his face with both hands.

If anyone was inadequate, then that error and that sin belong to me.

“It’s all my fault.”

Talking such a big game about a bloodless victory, only to bring back a result so far from that ideal.

Dozens had been injured by Arakiya’s sudden appearance, and several of the city’s guards had been killed by the team that rescued her. They had not suffered losses among their closest allies, but who could call it bloodless after Mizelda lost her leg?

I messed up. Messed up again and again, building a mountain of mistakes while missing my chance to make them right.

He had wanted the best possible ending where everything worked out, and what he had was just a

decently happy ending. Or maybe it would be better to call it a kind of bad ending.

Just deserts, huh? Going by Abel's standard, this is deserving of punishment. Worst case, maybe I should have to search for the best possibility, even if that means returning by……

"…What?"

Suddenly, a voice echoed in his ears.

Looking up immediately, he saw Rem's eyes right in front of him, looking carefully at him. Her eyes, which had been damp with self-reproach moments ago, were now looking into Subaru's, which were filled with an even deeper self-reproach.

"How would it be your fault?"

Subaru was shaken by Rem's gaze and could not move. Her eyes still damp, she reached out with her hand, gesturing at the wreckage on the floor.

"Mizelda's leg, and Louis's and Utakata's wounds, and Medium's and Flop's wounds, and everything? It's all your fault?"

"That's…that's right. If I had been more careful about our preparations, it wouldn't have ended up like this."

"You thought of a plan and achieved a result with that reckless-seeming idea. The general second-class was brought under control, and everyone was able to enter the city without having to fight. According to plan."

"But after that—"

"After that!"

Rem's eyes flared, and she raised her voice. The sudden movement caused Louis's head to slip from Rem's shoulder to her lap. She murmured a little but did not wake up. Providing support for her head, Rem steadied her breathing and looked into Subaru's eyes.

"'After that' is something no one could predict. Neither the appearance of that half-dressed woman nor her rampage. And yet—"

“_____”

“So why are you trying to shoulder all of the responsibility?”

Subaru gulped.

If he had to answer why, he thought that responsibility came with power. Just as Rem lamented the inadequacy of her healing, Subaru regretted not compensating for more things with his own authority. The realm of possibilities for his Return by Death was even larger than her healing.

Because if he used his power, it was possible for the future to be better or worse.

However…

“That’s…”

But that was a truth he could not share, not even with Rem.

And not just Rem, either. The authority he possessed was something he could not share, no matter how open and close he became with someone. Worse, the closer someone was, the more he was forbidden to talk about it. Who could share a truth with someone that might lead to their death?

The pain is scary. The pain of trying to say something about this is terrifying. Just ’cause I’ve felt that cold grip squeezing my heart so many times doesn’t mean I’ll ever get used to it. But the scariest thing isn’t the pain; it’s the loss. Is there anything scarier than that in this world?

Perhaps the reason Subaru Natsuki was given this authority was because he was so terribly scared of loss.

“…Why did you shield me?”

“Eh…?”

“When that half-dressed woman was attacking. I toppled the pillar, but it didn’t work… When she turned on me, you stood between us.”

Subaru had leaped in front of Rem to protect her without thinking. He had spread his arms, desperate to keep all danger away from her. If Arakiya had taken his life there, he would not have minded. He wanted Rem to live longer

than he would, even if only by a second.

That was…

“If you are trying to carry it all, to bear the burden of the results of your plan, to cover for me there, to take the blame for Mizelda losing her leg, then…”

“…”

“You are not strong enough to be able to do all of that… The hideous scent at first was a warning, but…”

Rem stopped there and glanced down at Louis lying in her lap. Gently caressing her long blond hair, Rem looked back at Subaru.

“Myself, Louis, Abel, Mizelda and the Shudrak, Medium and Flop—we are all people with our own will. We do not need you to protect us from everything.”

“Ah…”

“Please do not try to accomplish everything by yourself. You do not need to take responsibility for our actions.”

Overwhelmed by this barrage of words, Subaru puckered his mouth open and closed. His brain refused to grasp what she was saying, but he felt a formless dread, a warning that he shouldn’t hear any more.

Rem hounded Subaru as he kept cursing his failings.

I can’t let her say it……

“Because……”

Even though he knew he could not let it be said.

“…you are not a hero.”

5

Subaru wandered through the building on wobbling legs. He had no particular destination in mind. It was not even clear when he had started walking. By the time he was aware of it, he was already walking, though he wasn’t particularly conscious of it even now.

“*Ngh!*”

Suddenly, there was a thud. He had hit something head-on. Looking up, he had apparently run into a wall, since he had been wandering with his eyes at his feet. He had hit his forehead on a normal, indistinct wall. He let out a sigh while cradling his sore head.

And then, calmly, he hit his head against the hard wall again. There was another thud and a jolt of pain. Feeling an urge to experience that pain again, Subaru hit his head into the wall over and over and over again.

Over and over and over……

“Whoa there. Cut it out, Bro.”

Just as he started to do it again, a hand grabbed his shoulder. Looking back, he locked eyes with a gaze peering at him through an iron helm…

“I get you’re feeling like you wanna die, but there’s no end to it, no matter how many times you do it.”

CHAPTER 3

THE PATH THAT MUST BE TAKEN

1

Subaru's eyes widened as a burly hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

Al's words caught him completely off guard. Especially with those eyes looking right into him through the iron helm. The grip on his shoulder was strong, and something about it made it impossible to ignore, as if making it clear that he would not allow Subaru to continue harming himself like that, no matter what.

"Stop it."

"…Ah."

He made a weak sound at the repeated advice.

Suddenly, Subaru felt a swell of shame that someone had seen what he was just doing. *What am I? A badly programmed NPC just ramming myself into a wall?*

It was an apt description of how he had been wandering with his brain shut off.

"Keep doin' that shit and kill a few more brain cells, see what you get. Not that I'd let you."

"…Sorry to have troubled you."

"What's with the formal tone? Also, damn, your voice is rough."

Subaru was surprised himself at how ragged he sounded, and having Al point it out just sparked even more

scorn. Scorn for how completely his mental state had been shattered and how close it had pushed him to the edge.

Of course it had. Since none other than Rem had said:

“Was what your girl said really that bad?”

“*Ghh!*”

Subaru’s head jolted up.

“Whoa!”

Al jokingly recoiled, letting go of his shoulder, but Subaru pressed forward.

“Were you listening to that……?!”

“Wasn’t exactly trying to eavesdrop. I happened to come up to call you for something, but you looked like you were having a serious discussion, and then you just started staggering off. Then, sure enough…”

Al tapped the forehead of his helmet.

Sure enough, his concerns were on the money. Though apparently, it was less about Al’s observation skills and more about how obviously depressed Subaru was, to make him think that.

Subaru looked down, feeling guilty, his forehead twinging in pain.

“Well, you managed to just barely keep it under control in front of her, so she probably didn’t notice.”

“R-really…?”

Subaru felt a lame sense of relief as Al futzed with his helmet.

I’m a complete shit show, but if I at least managed not to make Rem worry, then that’s good.

And also…

“Al……what did you mean back there?”

“Mean where?”

“…About understanding feeling like you want to die, or whatever…”

Putting a hand to his aching head, Subaru questioned what Al had meant. Subaru had been pulled back to his right mind and stopped from harming himself, and Al had

said it in a roundabout way that made it seem like nothing, but it had also felt deeply meaningful in the moment.

The wanting to die and the “no end to it, no matter how many times…” It almost felt like Al grasped Subaru’s peculiar nature, understood his authority……

“It’s not like I wanna put it on a billboard or anything, but I’m not exactly a young man, right? I’ve got some experience with the sorts of difficulties you’re havin’, Bro. Doin’ something stupidly lame in front of a cute girl, too.”

“…Ah?”

“Not ‘ah.’ Doing something so embarrassing you want to die is a rite of passage for any guy. Still happens with unpleasant regularity, even now. The princess’s eyes…in those moments, I could seriously die.”

Al chuckled, smacking Subaru on the shoulder while sharing a bit of a life lesson as someone with a fair bit more experience. Subaru looked back at him, a bit wide-eyed at the contents of that lesson. *Is he bluffing or serious?*

“Hmm? What is it, Bro?”

But even if he tried to probe Al’s real meaning, the black metal got in the way. Until now, he had always just interpreted Al’s getup as a weird fashion sense, but standing across from him and trying to probe his real thoughts, he realized it was a far sturdier defense than he had imagined.

But I’m probably overthinking it.

“Not like someone could possibly know… I guess…”

Al’s phrasing had just happened to catch his attention, that was all.

If he really did know about Return by Death, then he’d let me know in a way that was easier to understand. Since this authority is something whose very existence is dangerous.

Just as with Roswaal, it was a menace, since anyone who knew about it would be unable to avoid getting involved.

And also…

“—It’s not like everyone summoned from another world ends up with some special power.”

I don’t know a ton about Al’s situation, but at the very least, it seems safe to assume that. If he did have some sort of special power, he presumably would have been able to prevent losing his arm.

Since if Subaru had been in a situation where he lost an arm like that, he would just…

“…return?”

Subaru looked a lot closer at his own left arm.

That hypothetical was entirely possible. In fact, the only reason he still had all his limbs attached was because of Return by Death’s blessing. More than a few of the runs where he had died had been accompanied by the loss of arms or legs.

If I had managed to survive one of those deaths, then it is entirely possible that I could have carried on with my life missing a body part.

Subaru had resolved not to rely solely on his Return by Death. So the question became how *far* he would rely on it.

An arm or a leg, a finger or an eye, how much would he have to lose in order to decide to Return by Death? And what if it was not his limbs but Emilia’s or Rem’s? He had not resorted to death in Pristella for Ricardo’s arm. He had not done it now for Mizelda’s leg. Because he did not know whether a better result was possible by using his authority. Even knowing that it was possible to prevent some of the losses that had happened along the way.

“I…”

“_____”

“I’m a hypocrite.”

Even knowing he had been granted a powerful authority, he could not take the decisive step. Subaru Natsuki was too, too incompetent and selfish.

And so…

“I even…gah?!”

“That’s a negative feedback loop, Bro.”

Subaru was about to make himself depressed again, thinking how he had made Rem say that, but a heavy flick landed square on his forehead before he could finish. Subaru’s eyes watered, and he looked at Al.

“Wh-what was…?”

“Man,” Al pointed down at Subaru, sounding exasperated. “How are you this shaken from one thing she said? No way you’re that pathetic from a stern talking-to. Don’t you think?”

“That’s…”

“It’s a problem if that’s all it takes to fluster you. It’s a bit embarrassing to say, but…I’ve got some expectations for you, Bro.”

“Expectations?”

That was so far out in left field that Subaru could only repeat the word.

“That’s right.” Al nodded deeply. “You remember that speech you made in Pristella, right?”

“Y-yeah, I remember, but…”

“I told you then, if you do that broadcast, that means upholding that heroic delusion.”

Remembering that hopeless situation, the city under siege by the archbishops, and so many people in a pinch. When Subaru was expected to fill a role, and he could not quite take the final step, Al had said that to him: *heroic delusion*.

Someone who carried the weight of expectations and hope for many people, someone who was not allowed to fall or fail. Shouldering the illusion of the hero that everyone wished you to be.

And in that moment, Subaru had answered far too carelessly—

“That’s how it’s always been.”

“It’s the same here. Who cares if someone rejects you? It doesn’t undo everything you’ve done or undo your resolve.”

“_____”

“Don’t go breaking now, Bro. Finish it. Live up to those expectations.”

And to top it off, Al, who knew Subaru’s achievements in the Water Gate City, patted his back.

It was something neither Rem, who had forgotten everything, nor Louis, who had reverted to an infantile state, knew. And of course, Abel, Flop, Medium, and the Shudrak did not know, either.

Priscilla, even if she knew, it was dubious whether she remembered, but…

“I haven’t forgotten. And sorry, Bro, but I’m not gonna let you escape it now.”

“What…?”

“You started it. You raised the banner, so you don’t get to drop it till you die.”

“_____”

Subaru gulped.

For the first time, he realized that what he had said on the broadcast had influenced more people than just the residents of the city, who had been swallowed up by fear and anxiety.

Like Al said, he could not drop the flag until he died. And death did not come for Subaru Natsuki. He would just have to keep struggling…

“…Forever.”

Subaru covered his eyes with both hands as he murmured that word.

Rem’s fatal words kept echoing in his head, tearing at his heart, resounding as he sank into the pool of blood…

“You are not a hero.”

“I always relied on Rem’s words.”

“You are not a hero.”

“The reason I made it here without giving up is because she believed in me. In the Sanctuary, in Pristella, and at the Pleiades Watchtower, too, always…”

“You are not a hero.”

“When she woke up, without her memories, I was still so happy… When it was just one step away, this was the moment when I most had to stick it out.”

“You are not a hero.”

“Those were the magic words that fired me up.”

“Because you’re my hero.”

Those words, that trust—that was why he had made it this far. Without them, Subaru Natsuki was…

“Then just get it back.”

“…Huh?”

Subaru gulped. His eyes were still covered, but he was drowning in a darkness far deeper than the back of his eyelids.

Al’s face was right there in front of him. Subaru reflexively stepped back, but Al stepped forward just as much, not letting him go. Subaru’s back hit the wall, unable to move any farther, as Al placed his palm on the wall, blocking the escape route.

“Get it back. Do whatever that girl is expecting you to do and get your self-confidence back.”

“Her expectations and my…”

“I’m not letting you drop the banner now. You’re gonna have to fight. If you don’t wanna just be a loser, then you’re gonna have to keep winnin’. Keep on winnin’ and get it back.”

“_____”

“The only way to get that lost trust back is by gettin’

results even better than expected. You know that as well as I do, Bro.”

As Al leaned in close, the cold metal of his helmet touched Subaru’s forehead. But Al was pleading with Subaru with such forceful, earnest sincerity that neither realized their heads were touching. It was like receiving a divine revelation.

Lost trust and lowered expectations—when it came to that, the most bitter memory Subaru had was, of course, his disgrace at the castle. Emilia’s trust and expectations, and what all the royal candidates thought about him—it all cratered that day. The reason he had managed to regain some trust from them later was because of his actions.

It sure wasn’t because I slammed my head against a broken wall.

“…What am I, stupid…? No, I am stupid.”

No progress, no growth, and more than anything, he had no time to be standing around.

He had to protect Rem and bring her back home. Unlike then, he had no one else to rely on to achieve that. Rem had no one other than Subaru.

Even if Rem had said that Subaru was not a hero. Even if those words that were such a powerful pillar of support had been torn down by the same lips that had first spoken them.

“I’m Rem’s hero.”

Just puffing himself up over that claim was not Subaru Natsuki’s true duty.

“…Got a bit of that spark again?”

The grimness in Al’s voice softened when he heard Subaru’s resolve.

“Yeah.” Subaru looked up at Al from up close and personal. “It’s a lot better now… But get away. Shoo. Pinning me against the wall— Who’s even the target demo for this?”

“Damn straight! You’re cross-dressing, and I’m a one-armed, almost forty-year-old geezer!”

Laughing from his belly, Al removed his hand from the wall and backed off. As Subaru’s vision opened up, it felt like the whole world was opening up, too.

Honestly, that was just what I needed to hear, but I can’t really say I’m safely back on two feet, either. I’d be quaking and watching her face like a hawk, scared to hear her say the same thing again.

He still did not have an answer for how far he was willing to use his authority and for what ends, but there was one thing he could say confidently. This arrogant power of Subaru Natsuki’s had to exist to make the hero’s delusion he had to carry a reality.

So I’m gonna have to keep struggling with how to deal with this power.

“Ah, speaking of which, there’s something I wanted to ask, Bro.”

Subaru was looking down at his hands, refreshing his determination, when Al suddenly spoke up. Considering the exchange just now, Subaru was dubious of what he could possibly hesitate to say.

“What’s that about? If there’s something you want to ask, then ask it.”

“Then, getting to the point…what exactly is the deal with that Rem girl?” Al cocked his head.

It certainly was late to be asking that sort of question. But the question made him realize, finally, that he had not actually explained anything.

“She’s someone you came all the way to the empire with. You didn’t even bring that half-elf girl or the kid you’re contracted with. And to top it off, you’re acting like you’re married?”

“That’s for convenience’s sake, and she doesn’t really like it, either.”

“But a single thing from her is enough to bend you this far outta shape. The hell’s up with that?”

He lowered his voice, sounding suddenly serious.

Subaru furrowed his brow and tried to remember. Confirming to himself that Al and Rem had not met—at the very least, not in this timeline. He had not even brought up Rem in front of Al before. It was natural that he would not know about her. And yet something about it seemed off.

It was probably because of the way Al asked the question.

“_____”

I can’t see his expression, but there’s an intensity in his eyes.

Subaru interpreted it as an expression of seriousness and tension. Combined with the previous exchange, he could feel his impression of his one and only fellow countryman changing over the course of a short span.

“Rem is one of my…one of our group. But she was hurt by the Archbishop of Gluttony. Because of that, she’s disappeared from everyone’s memories. She can’t even remember herself.”

“…So that’s how it is? I see, I see. That explains it.”

“Explains it?”

Al put his hand to his chin and nodded at Subaru’s brief explanation. Subaru cocked his head in confusion.

“Yeah,” he added. “There were a bunch of things bothering me… Someone I don’t know, but she looks like

someone I do. It's like a fish bone caught in your throat. Impossible to ignore."

"Like someone you know…? You mean Ram?"

"Yeah, that's it."

Subaru gazed in wonder at the sudden, unexpected connection. But that was enough for Subaru to accept Al's response, too. He knew painfully well the reaction that came from losing all memory of one of the two twins from everyone in Emilia's camp. Personality and nature aside, Ram and Rem were very similar twins. Though lately, he had started to think that, surprisingly, they might be pretty similar in nature, too.

If Al knew Ram, then he would be confused at seeing someone who looked just like her.

"But it's the first I'm hearing about you and Ram being acquaintances."

"'Acquaintances' is a bit strong. Just a bit of a connection is all. But that would generally explain things. Twins, then? And you're hoping to reunite them."

"…Yeah, that's right."

Reuniting Rem and Ram was priority number one. And having done that, welcoming Rem back with everyone in Emilia's camp, bringing her back to her home. Those were Subaru's main goals. For their sake, he could not afford to not regain Rem's trust.

I'll win her trust back, no matter what, and get her to take my hand.

"—All right, got it. I'll back you on that, Bro."

With that bigger goal back in mind, Subaru clenched his fist. And right in front of him, Al, having digested all that information, nodded.

"*Aaeeh?*"

"You know you just made a pretty dumb-sounding noise there, Bro?"

"Drop it! Or not, but what did you say? 'Backing'? Who?"

"Me, backing you, Bro. Well, I'm sure the princess will

have some choice words, but I'm assuming there's something I do about that. Anyway, I've decided to back you."

"_____"

"But remember, I've only got one shoulder to put into it."

"That's not funny."

It was a weirdly heated show of support, so Subaru was confused. Of course he would be. *Is there something that struck a chord in him?*

"…What, you're helping because you know Ram?"

"Not that. You're the one I'm backing, Bro. Anyway, if you're gonna be the hero, there's no getting away from that girl. I'm just gonna help some, is all."

"I'm not really trying to be a hero…"

"—You're going to be one. Subaru Natsuki will be a hero."

He said it in a way that refused any rejection. It was a quiet, forceful statement, hiding an intensity that scorched Subaru's heart.

"Kidding."

And then the swell of heat dissipated with Al's joke.

"My bad, my bad," Al said, taking Subaru's hand as he struggled to keep up with the sudden changes. "But try to keep that level of determination, Bro. Using a few bluffs to cut off every path to retreat is a good way to get lazy guys like us to straighten up."

With that, Al spun around and coolly started walking away.

"Al, was that…?"

"Whoops, we should leave the chitchat at that for now. I just remembered, but I came out here to call you back to the conference room. I'm already gonna get an earful from the princess."

"_____"

"C'mon, hurry it up. We'll have plenty of chances to talk later."

Al looked back over his shoulder and shrugged, gesturing for Subaru to hurry along. Subaru reluctantly shelved his questions for now.

I don't know how seriously I should take what he said just now.

But being straight-up told he had support was enough to make Subaru a little more optimistic. Even if he had to force it, he needed to look forward.

I have to straighten up, hold my head high, and step confidently forward……

"To be…"

…Rem's hero.

Because otherwise he'd lose the right to call himself that.

"Heroic delusion, huh?"

As Al hurried along with a silly scurry, a soft murmur echoed just inside his iron helm. He closed his eyes as he spoke in a voice just for himself, one that did not escape the confines of the helmet.

And, eyes still closed, as if echoing in the darkness behind his eyelids……

"I'm gonna need you to be a hero for me, Bro—no, Subaru Natsuki."

2

"Just how long must it take to bring back a single commoner? Do you think that the value of your time is equivalent to that of mine?"

"No, that's why I apologized, isn't it…?"

Al meekly bowed his head beneath his lady's cold gaze.

The aforementioned scolding awaited Al when he returned to the conference room with Subaru. The simple chore of going out to summon him had led to an

unexpectedly long conversation, so Priscilla's anger was understandable.

Understandable, but given how much of a push he had gotten from Al's words, Subaru could not just overlook it, either.

"Don't blame Al so much, Priscilla. I was the one at fault here, not him."

"Hmph. It was, in all likelihood, two jesters comforting themselves over some pointless anguish. Is your forehead red from ramming it into a wall?"

"Do you have clairvoyance or something? It's scary how accurate you are."

Priscilla landed a clean blow with that bored response when Subaru tried to defend Al.

A man in an iron mask pinning a cross-dresser to the wall isn't exactly your everyday rom-com event.

He had no choice but to shudder at Priscilla's powers of perception. But either way…

"We cannot reach a conclusion without your presence, since you are Abel's strategist."

Following Priscilla's taunting gaze, Subaru looked over at Abel. Abel was sitting at the round table, arms crossed in silence beneath Subaru's probing eyes.

Abel's strategist comment had probably been figurative, but having used it to counter Priscilla's argument directly, he could not just withdraw it now, from the looks of things.

"You sure you don't have an unexpected tendency to tie a noose around your own neck by acting without thinking?"

"You should beware the quality of your own comments. No matter how excellent the plan, the choice of description affects whether it is perceived as wise or foolish."

"Really laying it on thick, considering how much you regret calling me a strategist…"

Grimacing at Abel's brazen response, Subaru sighed heavily and then looked again at the faces gathered around the room—Abel, Priscilla, Zikr, and Talitta, who was still

nervous after inheriting the seat of chief.

“So, this conclusion that hasn’t been reached is whether Priscilla will cooperate with us? Judging from the earlier conversation, it sounded like Priscilla had someone backing her.”

“It seems you do at least have enough of a brain to follow a conversation. It is, of course, that very discussion. And you still remember that whoever claims most of the Nine wins?”

“Yeah, up to the part where this ‘One’ guy is not really fit for our purpose and is more of an obstacle than anything.”

It would be a problem if he was left free and became a threat, but winning him over would not help much in the grander scheme of things, either. A pretty troublesome piece to have wandering the board in these sorts of games.

Little to offer as an ally, but a lethal threat as an enemy.

“But that’s about the end-stage victory condition, not about your and your cooperator’s support. Right?”

“…*Hmph*.”

Priscilla cleared her throat when Subaru neatly summarized where things had been. For a brief moment, there was a flash of curiosity in her crimson eyes. Apparently feeling some degree of interest, she glanced over at Al and smiled faintly.

“Is this the result of the jesters’ conversation? You’ve become inappropriately cordial, Al.”

“Whoa now, what are you saying, Princess? Implying a nice, good-natured guy like me being kind to someone is unusual. That’s slander.”

Al shrugged at Priscilla’s barb. As for the comment about their conversation, Priscilla was, as usual, good at guessing the nature of things, including her perceptive grasp of how that conversation affected Subaru.

Abel tapped the table with his finger, drawing attention.

“The subject has drifted enough. What is necessary now is a conclusion to the discussion…... How does Priscilla

intend to deal with us?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m a strategist who tends to get distracted by side topics.”

Abel’s eyes narrowed in annoyance at that sarcastic response, but Subaru just stuck out his tongue and ignored the glare. Then, turning to Priscilla, he continued the previous topic.

“So what about it? Whether you’ve got support from Priscilla and her cooperator or not, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re going to have to bust down the doors at the capital…”

“The princess’s support would change the extent of the door-busting, though.”

“That is quite enough of the jesters’ performance. Nonetheless, your diagnosis is correct. Therefore, I have set a condition in order to determine whether to lend you… to lend Abel a hand.”

“A condition?” Subaru furrowed his brow.

“’Tis a simple thing. Make an ally of one of the Nine Divine Generals,” Priscilla answered, as if it were nothing.

“One of……?” Subaru murmured under his breath.

The condition she had set did not sound unreasonable. If they were going to embark on this fight for the throne, then it was a given they would have to gather more of the Nine Divine Generals to their cause. Priscilla was just asking them to take the first step.

If anything, it’s a side quest we were going to clear anyway as part of the main quest. That’s pretty free……

“That’s how it might seem, but this isn’t something to be jumping for joy over, is it?”

“Of course not. With Goz’s status unknown, there are none among the Nine who will obey me unconditionally. There are also not many eccentrics eager to join a losing battle.” Abel laid out the cold, hard facts.

“…If you can’t show at least some path to victory, no one will take the leap?”

Subaru furrowed his brow and made a troubled face.

Given Abel's grievous self-awareness that the authority of the emperor alone did not move the Nine Divine Generals, support from Priscilla and her cooperator was something he desperately wanted. If anything, he wanted to use their names in any potential negotiations.

"To be clear, you should not expect benevolence from me. I am blessed with magnanimity, but it is not spared for beggars."

Propping her head up in boredom, she neatly ground Subaru's faint hope under her heel.

I already knew it, but she's not sweet or kind. Her crimson eyes were callously weighing them. If they could not clear the barest requirement that she had set, then they were of no use to her.

"If I may, Your Highness, perhaps we should rely on General First-Class Cecils?"

"Do you have some idea, Zikr?"

Just as a heavy silence was setting in, Zikr spoke up, getting Subaru's hopes up, but he shook his head at that hopeful gaze.

"No. As His Highness mentioned earlier, considering the current balance of power, no one sane would attempt to support us as things stand. And so…"

"Yes?"

"We would have no choice but to rely on those not possessed of a rational state of mind, such as…General First-Class Cecils…"

"Ah, so you also think he's not right in the head."

There had been nothing but the worst character reports on this Cecils. If Zikr was using his craziness as an argument to go after him, then he must be seriously bad. But if he had to be dealt with sooner or later, then taking the plunge early in order to clear Priscilla's condition was a reasonable option.

"Before we even get to the convincing part, though, the

approach is a problem. Where does he usually stay?”

“He is usually living in Arakiya’s house in the capital.”

“Ah, so then Arakiya’s… What? Why?”

It took Subaru a few seconds to process Abel’s calm response. It was so unexpected that even Priscilla furrowed her brow unpleasantly.

From what I’ve heard, One is Cecils and Two is Arakiya, so……

“So then, are the two of them lovers or something?”

In that case, us beating Arakiya back is gonna leave a real bad impression.

It was suddenly looking like they had done a great job of uniting both One and Two against them. However, Abel answered Subaru’s question in the negative.

“No, they are not. Arakiya seeks an opportunity to kill Cecils, but every time she tries, she only damages everything around them. Thus, my order to Cecils.”

“What?”

“Given that it will happen regardless, he should stay someplace where it is simple for Arakiya to make her attempts on his life.”

“…I…see…?”

Even with a clear and reasoned explanation, connecting the dots was incredibly difficult for Subaru.

I don’t really get the state of mind needed to just let your highest generals try to kill each other, and I can’t understand following an order to go live with someone who’s trying to kill me, either.

“In fact, how do you even go about living with someone trying to kill you…?”

Subaru was struck by the feeling he was saying something absurd, but unfortunately, he could not grasp why it felt so strange, so he just set it aside.

“Anyway, Cecils is in the capital… Are you really all right to be nonchalantly strolling around there?”

“Of course not. Given the present situation, approaching

the capital would be akin to burning myself at the stake. And even should I do so, there is no guarantee that Cecils will be in the capital."

"Then we're at an impasse, aren't we…?"

When it came to the inner workings of Volakian politics, Subaru's knowledge was of no use. But this was a proposition by Zikr, a general himself. If that was the plan with the highest odds of success possible, then things were looking grim for Abel if he rejected it.

"…This isn't really the time or place to be standing still."

A dark and heavy something asserted itself in Subaru's breast. The solid mass of powerlessness he felt, the bittersweet sediment that refused to disappear even after he'd slammed his head against the wall, the lingering effects of Rem forsaking him.

Because of it, I lost Rem's trust.

I have to get rid of this grime as soon as possible and recover her trust. Every second stalled out here is a second wasted.

"…There is an option."

But as Subaru gritted his teeth, Abel stopped him with a single line. His face swung back up, and Abel closed one eye.

"Cease that meager expression. I have long since grown tired of it. As I said, there is an option."

"Sorry, but my face is the upper bound on character creation if you can't use IAP. And more to the point, who cares about face rating scores? What's the option, then?"

"Zikr's suggestion. Using one part of it."

"A part of my suggestion? I am honored, sir, but…what part?"

Zikr furrowed his bushy brow, confused by the direction of the conversation. Subaru was feeling some of the same bewilderment. *Also, his plan was to go after Cecils, which means going to the capital, so that should be out, right?*

"Or do you have some way of calling out Cecils…?"

“There is no such convenient method. However, as Zikr said, there are possibilities if we consider who else lacks a rational mind.”

“—*Ghh!* Could it…? Your Highness, that is dangerous! Please reconsider!!!”

“Huh? Eh?”

Zikr’s expression changed, and he immediately tried to talk Abel down. Eyes spinning at the sudden change, Subaru wondered what it could be.

Zikr seemed to have an idea of what Abel meant, but it did not really strike a chord with Subaru. Judging by the flow of the conversation, it seemed the idea was to approach someone who was crazy, but…

“There’s someone crazier than this unpopular Cecils guy?”

“I would not call her crazy! However, she is far too dangerous…!”

“Still, though, Afro General, she’s one of the Nine Divine Generals, if I’ve been following the discussion correctly. Not gonna be many people left to count on if you keep ruling out all of them. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“That is…true. However…”

With Subaru and Al both countering, Zikr fell silent with a bitter look.

I feel a bit bad, but with so many people that would make Zikr anxious in key roles, that has to come down to a problem in Abel’s management.

This is the tragic reality born from a pure meritocracy that doesn’t consider character.

“I’m scared to ask, but who is the one causing Zikr all this grief?”

“That is a foolish and roundabout phrase, but were I to answer in the spirit of the question, it is the Divine General based in the Demon City of Chaosflame—Yoruna Mishigure.”

“Yoruna Mishigure…?”

It was an unfamiliar city, but a name he had heard before. One of the Nine Divine Generals listed earlier. If he remembered right, her alias was…

"'The Flamboyant' or something along those lines?"

"Good job, Bro, remembering that straight off the bat."

"I always liked keeping up with the aliases of the main characters in manga and stuff. But is this Yoruna…?"

As he was saying that, he glanced over at Zikr and then fell speechless. Zikr's face was pale and twisted in a grimace, hidden behind his own hands.

"The Seventh of the Nine Divine Generals, General First-Class Yoruna Mishigure…"

"Is she really that bad? The name sounds like a woman's name…"

If that impression was correct, then that would mean the man who had been incredibly gentlemanly with Subaru just because he was cross-dressing was terrified of a woman.

It's hard to imagine what kind of craziness is in store for us……

"She is very beautiful. That is a point all would acknowledge, not only myself. However, General First-Class Yoruna has a small problem… No, it cannot in good faith be described as small."

"What sort of problem is it?"

"Treason."

""Huh?""

Subaru and Al both gaped when that word left Zikr's mouth. Taken aback, Subaru wondered whether he had just misheard it, but Zikr, still covering his face, continued with a trembling voice.

"General First-Class Yoruna Mishigure is a true traitor who has rebelled repeatedly against Emperor Vincent Volakia's rule."

"Don't appoint someone like that a general!!!"

For a second time, Subaru's shout rang out.

3

Not long after Subaru's angry shout echoed in the room, Priscilla opened her fan with an audible snap, judging that the discussion had reached a conclusion.

"It seems the subject has been resolved."

It was a conclusion that Subaru honestly had some serious grievances with, but…

"There is no other move. The only one of the Nine Divine Generals who might possibly follow me is Yoruna Mishigure."

"Didn't she rebel because she hated you…?"

"No. That is not necessarily a given…though it is, at the very least, impossible for me to guess her thoughts."

"If you say so, then I suppose, but…"

If a source as trustworthy as Zikr was vouching for it, then Subaru could only withdraw his suspicion.

Abel snorted in discontent.

"Explain yourself. Why do you so readily accept Zikr's opinion?"

"Even if two people have the same opinion, it makes a difference who says it. Do you think you have higher credibility than Zikr in my mind?"

"I see. But what will you do if Zikr dies?"

"Not even as a thought experiment! I'll murder you!"

Subaru did not hesitate to shout down Abel's violent implication. But either way……

"Setting aside that stupid train of thought, this… Chaosflame? Where is it? Far from Guaral?"

"Not so far. In that regard as well, it is the logical next step. It is southeast from here, south of the Badheim Jungle."

"Ah, that makes sense…"

When it was pointed out on the map, Subaru could understand Abel's explanation.

South of the jungle where the Shudrak lived, it was

farther away than Guaral was from the jungle, but it was a far more reasonable distance than the capital or anywhere even farther to the west.

"Also, why's it called the 'Demon City'?"

"Do not cower, commoner. The reason for its name is nothing that will make your knees shake. Said land is an old city where many races live in disarray. Volakia is inhabited by many more races than Lugunica to begin with, but Chaosflame is a particularly chaotic cauldron."

"A salad bowl of all different types of people mixed together…and thus 'Demon City'?"

Calling a place known for its disorder "Chaos" sure feels meaningful. Though this is a different world, so maybe it's just a coincidence.

"—Go to the Demon City and gain the backing of Yoruna Mishigure, Seventh of the Divine Generals. Should I achieve that, you will…cooperate…correct, Priscilla?"

"That is sufficient. I am magnanimous, am I not? I will not add conditions after the fact."

"Felt a little like you said something betraying a dwindling supply of magnanimity earlier, but…you know what, never mind."

Subaru retracted his unnecessary comment after a glare from Priscilla.

And with their general plan of action settled…

"Abel, could you please take me with you?"

"Talitta?"

Talitta stood up unexpectedly. She had sat at the table as the Shudrak representative throughout the meeting, but she had not once opened her mouth to speak. Abel's black eyes narrowed at her sudden request.

"What is your intent? You have succeeded to the chiefdom of the Shudrak. That is an unshakable fact, regardless of your self-confidence."

"I…know that. I cannot reject the position that my sister passed to me… However, I am inadequate to lead my

people, to lead the Shudrak…”

Looking down, Talitta bit her lip. Subaru was painfully aware of the nature of the unease she was feeling as she clenched her fists. With the sudden ceremony and having to bear such a large burden unexpectedly, Talitta could not accept that she had an appropriate strength to meet the moment.

She needed this. Something to let her acknowledge herself. A success of some sort.

At a fundamental level, it was the same sort of thing that Subaru so desperately wanted right now, too.

“I’m in favor of it, Abel. If Talitta succeeded Mizelda with her current state of mind, she wouldn’t be able to actually lead her people…I think.”

“_____”

“Besides, either way, we’re going to need an ally for protection on the road, right? We know Talitta’s strength, and she’s someone we cr…slipped into town together with.”

“Natsumi…”

He changed the wording partway, but that was what he wanted to say. Talitta looked deeply moved at Subaru sticking up for her. As someone who understood the pain she was feeling, he wanted to support her.

“What will the Shudrak do without you?”

“I will leave my sister in charge as proxy temporarily. Kuna and Holly will surely provide good support. We cannot move large numbers, since Guaral must be defended.”

“You were thinking of that during your silence?”

Hearing her immediate response, Abel was now looking at her in a more favorable light. He tapped his temple lightly.

“We will go to Chaosflame in a small party. Of course, I must be present, since I will have to meet Yoruna Mishigure. However, we are not besieging or assaulting the city.”

“All you can really bring is some protection…”

“Talitta, you will accompany me. And then—”

“I happened to hear your conversation!!!”

As Abel was speaking, the door suddenly burst open, and a figure bounded energetically into the room. Flop O’Connell, the saintly merchant unafraid to interrupt the emperor and who did not hesitate to call said emperor a new friend.

Flop was breathing excitedly, monopolizing the attention of the room.

“Ms. Talitta, I’m deeply moved by your spirit, volunteering for such a serious role! Finding a way to grapple with an important job suddenly thrust upon you… it’s a great thing!”

“Th-thank you, Flop…”

“In order to ensure you and the chief are safe on the road, I’d like to make a proposition. It would be a good idea to bring my sister, Medium, with you!”

Holding up his finger, Flop adamantly asserted the wisdom of his suggestion.

He almost got me nodding along due to sheer momentum, but thinking about it rationally, it’s a pretty out-of-nowhere suggestion.

“I-in what way?”

“Mhm, of course you’ve got questions. Allow me to list all the reasons why I’m recommending Medium! First of all, she is strong, and she also has charm. And most of all, she’s a smooth talker!”

“A smooth talker…!”

“She can keep the conversation moving at a brisk and pleasant pace, so I’m sure there will be no awkward silences on the road. She isn’t shy and can get along with anyone. What do you think? She’s a perfect choice, right?”

Flop flashed a pearly smile as he sang his sister’s praises, but despite his confident sales shtick, two thirds of the points were basically just down to Medium’s charm. The only real selling point he mentioned was her strength.

Subaru happened to know that that point, at least, was real, but…

“But have you even talked to Medium about it?”

“Nope, I haven’t! But it’s fine; I’m going to talk to her about it after this!”

“…I-is it fine?”

Discussing a serious trip on the road was not the same as promising to go out to play. Was it really all right to just mention it later, when the decision would saddle her with a dangerous job? Subaru would feel really bad if this caused a rift in their sibling relations.

I could definitely see her just easily accepting it with a smile, too, though.

“Assuming for the moment Medium is okay with it, what do you think, Abel?”

“…Her strength is adequate. If she will fulfill her role, then I will not say no.”

“Then you don’t need to worry! My sister pretty much always does everything she’s told to do with all her strength! But you do need to beware that she tends not to think too much if you don’t tell her to do something.”

Flop put his hands on his hips and laughed heartily.

It was clear from the way he was saying it, and from Abel’s attitude, too, but Flop would not be on the roster headed to Chaosflame.

“…It goes for Medium, too. Neither of you needs to go along with this, you know.”

“Don’t be silly, buddy. I’ve got my goal. An act of revenge I have to see through to the end.”

“…Ah…”

It was a violent sort of word for Flop to say, but he already knew that his goal was anything but. His anger was reserved for an unreasonable world that, as cheerful as Flop was, he could not forgive. That was the reason why, even in this world, Subaru did not doubt Flop’s innate goodness, the reason he trusted him and had stuck with

him all this time.

“My sister is the same. Our goals and our paths are one and the same. If we abandon you and your missus or the chief there, we wouldn’t be able to hold our heads high anymore.”

“…I’m gonna cry. I might just fall for you.”

“Ha-ha-ha, that really hits hard coming from you when you look like that! But I couldn’t do that to your missus. I’ll accept the feeling, though!”

Even his rejection was smooth. Subaru could only feel impressed seeing it.

Most likely, Medium would gladly go along with what Flop said. So Medium was safe to add to the roster.

“Ms. Talitta, please take care of my sister. Since you could even get along well with me, I’m sure you’ll do well with her, too.”

“S-sure…um, please be careful yourself…” Talitta fidgeted, looking down a bit.

“Hmm? Right, I’ll be doing my best here with Mr. Zikr and the rest of the Shudrak!”

Flop hit his chest with a thud. It was an adorable scene, and once it was over, Subaru cleared his throat a little.

“Incidentally, about me…”

“Unfortunately, you are already a subject of the negotiations. As we will need to sway Yoruna Mishigure’s opinion, you cannot be left out.”

“That is a lot of phrasing I can’t help but wonder about, but what do you mean, I am a ‘subject of the negotiations’?”

“The fall of Guaral was your strategy. That fact will become widely known ere long. Not least because I plan to actively spread it far and wide.”

“What?”

Subaru’s eyes spun, not grasping the meaning of Abel’s words.

Why would he give Subaru credit for the capture of the

fortress city, and why would he go out of his way to spread word about it?

Subaru Natsuki's standard starting point was generally being underestimated.

"There is a need for him to make it seem he has useful tools beyond just himself." It took a moment for Subaru to understand Priscilla's curt answer. "Of course, it is not just you, commoner. The Shudrak of the Badheim Jungle, the guards of Guaral, and General Second-Class Zikr Osman are also fodder for negotiation. But the most valuable is…"

"The strategist who devised the plan that led to victory in the city… I have said it before: The powerful are respected within the empire. Not simply for martial prowess, but also in terms of ingenuity."

And thus, Subaru Natsuki had value. That was what Abel and Priscilla were guaranteeing.

To be honest, Subaru personally had very complicated feelings about how the battle for Guaral turned out. No matter how highly it was valued, it would not change the fact that he had lost Rem's trust, and it went without saying that his fame in the empire did not even begin to compare to how much he valued her trust.

However…

"If you're saying I'm useful, then bring it on. Use me as best you can. In exchange…"

"In exchange?"

"You better get your ass back on that throne. And when you do, you're gonna get us safely back home. That's one thing I won't yield on," Subaru declared steadfastly.

Hearing that, Abel widened his eyes just a little, and then he let out a long breath.

"It need not even be said. That is what I must do."

4

Using everything he could, Abel would steal back the imperial throne.

That meant using Guaral, of course, the Shudrak nation, General Second-Class Zikr Osman, and none other than Subaru Natsuki's achievements, too.

With those weapons at his disposal, he was setting out for his next target, the Demon City of Chaosflame, but…

"If we're gonna march in with a small, elite unit, then what? It's four of us—you, me, Talitta, and Medium, but…"

"…About that, mind if I say something?"

"Al?"

As they were discussing the final member of the expedition, Al piped up. Raising his one arm, he scratched the back of his neck.

"Princess, mind loosening the reins a wee bit? I wanna go with my bro here for a bit."

"Wha?!"

"Your voice cracked a bit there, Bro. Are you really that surprised?"

Al laughed awkwardly, but even if he passed it off as nothing, Subaru could not exactly just accept it.

"Wh-why are you so…?"

"I'm the one who said it, right? I'm supporting you, Bro. Even an over-the-hill old man like me can be useful somewhere, I bet." Al shrugged his burly shoulders.

"…You were really that serious about it?"

Thinking back to the exchange before returning to the meeting, he was surprised at how closely Al was sticking to what he had said.

It was true that it had been encouraging, that it had given him some courage to keep going and a push in the back, too, but he had not thought Al really meant that support literally.

"Heh, what are you freezing up for? Really that moved by my offer?"

"…No, now that I'm past the first shock, it's not like I've

heard anything about you being particularly strong, and with you, me, and Abel, the fighting strength of the men would be pretty unbalanced."

"Sorry if you had your hopes up, but I'm a fair bit weaker than that Amazon!"

Al baldly confessed while pointing at Talitta.

To be honest, Talitta's strength is probably in the top tier of the Shudrak, but after being in a fight with one of the Nine Divine Generals, that's still not strong enough to be foolproof.

Either way, though…

"But I am grateful that you would say that, so I appreciate the thought, at least."

"Don't worry about it, Bro… Wait, what? Just 'the thought'? Was I just politely rejected? Right off the block, no connection this time?"

A series of question marks popped over Al's head, but he definitely had the right interpretation of what had just happened.

I do genuinely appreciate the offer, but this is Volakia. Al joining would be even more easygoing and careless than letting Flop and Medium join……

"—Al."

"Princess."

A beautiful voice spoke Al's name. It was, of course, Priscilla Bariel, enshrined in her seat at the round table. Her crimson eyes narrowed, unreadable as they turned on Al, who, despite being her retainer, had declared his own intentions for his next move.

"It was you who requested to accompany me to the citadel city. You would leave me to embark on amusement with your fellow jester?"

"Yes, though I've got a feeling this isn't gonna rise to the level of a road trip. Or would you be lonely without me, Princess? If you're going to stop me with a hug, then—"

"Fool."

“Yeah, figured.”

Interrupted by her sharp scorn, Al slumped, not really having gotten his hopes up. Glaring at the top of his helmeted head, Priscilla exhaled slightly.

“…At least perform an entertaining dance.”

“Oh. Will do. You take care of yourself, too, Princess. Don’t forget to take care of yourself just ’cause me and Schult aren’t around. Your beauty is the world’s beauty.”

“It goes without saying. Who do you think I am?”

“The center of the world and my princess, Priscilla Bariel, of course.”

With that silly, smug bit, Al bowed irreverently and then, turning around, raised his hand.

“Take good care of me.”

“Huh? That was the final decision? I don’t get any say?!”

“What? Do you actually hate me? I’m gonna cry. Or did I start smelling really decrepit and ancient without realizing it? One of those things where it’s unbearable to be around?”

“I didn’t say anything like that. But also, why are you the one deciding…?”

“Nah, you’re free to say no if you want. But can you? It’s the princess, right?”

Al gestured with his chin at Priscilla, who was fanning herself.

That bold and untroubled manner was the undeniable core of Al’s point. Going against something Priscilla had decided was a terrifying proposition.

But we can’t afford not to say no if it is going to lead to real anxiety down the line.

“—It matters not. If it is necessary, then you may follow as well.”

“Abel, you jerk! Aren’t you supposed to be treating me like your strategist?!”

But just when he was about to let Priscilla have a piece of his mind, Subaru was stabbed in the back, flying in the

face of the employment agreement he thought was in place.

"What's the point of a strategist if you won't even ask their advice?"

"Do not presume. I will lend an ear to an opinion worthy of heeding. But I am the one who wields final authority to decide. I will not yield that to you."

"*Gnrgh*, one of those annoying bosses who claims all the credit at work…?"

"Do not make me repeat myself. The achievements are yours. They cannot be otherwise."

The emperor driven from the throne, accompanied by a wise strategist who could not be underestimated.

What he wanted was my reputation. He'd let me have the credit and even puff it up some. But that was no different from building a fiction.

"It can't be fake. If it isn't real, I can't get back what I lost."

"…Then convince me and everyone around you by your own hand. So long as you cannot do that, it remains nothing more than stupid delusions of grand aspirations."

"You…! Damn it, I'll show you. Whatever bad debts you load me up with, I'll still make it work."

Gritting his teeth, Subaru looked right into Abel's cold black eyes. Even though they had made it over the mountain together, it did not change the tenuousness of their bond. *It's not just the difference between Lugunica and Volakia. There might be something bigger between us.*

But either way, if the day came when he had an unbridgeable difference in opinion with Abel, Subaru would…

"…Did he mean me when he said that 'bad debt' stuff, Princess?"

"Fool."

In the background of Subaru's thoughts, Al slumped his shoulders, and Priscilla muttered curtly.

5

With the roster set for the expedition to the Demon City of Chaosflame, things began to move.

“Lead the soldiers in Guaral until I return. I will send word before long.”

“I shall not fail you, even should it cost my life.”

Zikr knelt on one knee, accepting his order and appointment with reverence.

Against all expectations, he now stood in the position of facing the entire empire as an enemy. He did not have any personal doubts in obeying Abel, but that did not mean all the soldiers and officers in the town felt the same. The full efforts of the general would be crucial to unify them into a singular army.

In that sense as well, Zikr was a lucky find.

“I am grateful to you. The bloodless siege that you devised and His Highness sanctioned allowed myself and my staff to join your camp without losses.”

“_____”

“Please go forth and fulfill your duties, Ms. Natsumi.”

Zikr had praised Subaru’s achievements when they parted. He did not have any confidence that his response was appropriate, but while it was not a result he felt comfortable praising unreservedly, the fact that things were able to end without Zikr’s death was something he could call a good result.

And…

“Are you really going?”

“_____”

“No, that is a strange question. Forget I said anything.”

Rem looked down, unable to hide her exhaustion. Subaru’s breath caught slightly in the back of his throat.

Leaning on her cane, she was standing in the entrance of

the city hall. She was wearing lighter clothes than her travel outfit so that she could run around more easily to care for the wounded as a healer. Rem was staying in Guaral.

They would be going their separate ways for a short time while Subaru traveled to Chaosflame.

Subaru smiled awkwardly at Rem's words when she had come to see him off, but even knowing it was meant kindly, that was not something he could do.

"They're not all the best memories, but hearing you tell me to forget something about you hurts."

"Ah, that's not what I—"

"Getting strangled and my fingers being broken—those are all things I received from you, and they are all precious memories that could never be replaced."

"Hah?"

There had just been a lot of impactful events after being sent flying to Volakia, that was all. It had not been meant as a joke, but Rem's cold, piercing gaze was still his only reward.

I have lots and lots of hopeful and happy memories tucked away in my heart, too. Of Rem letting me a little closer, or of the compassion she has had for me.

—The most painful memory is tucked away in that exact same place, though.

"You really are not nervous at all… Are you really all right?"

"It's exhausting being on edge all the time… If you're asking, then I've certainly got plenty of thoughts about it all. If possible, I'd like to just stay by your side forever."

"Haaah."

"Such a lifeless reaction! Though I guess it's better than just being ignored…"

The cold shoulder really did hurt, but he was telling her the truth. Ever since the decision had been made, his every waking moment, and even now, was spent agonizing over

leaving her behind in Guaral.

How much better would this all be if I could just keep her close and protect her from trouble and danger and every sort of problem?

“The truth is, I’d like to be able to tie an unbreakable thread between us.”

“Are you being serious…?”

“Pretty serious.”

“_____”

She had finally stopped even saying “hah,” too.

Of course, he knew she would reject the proposition, but he said it anyway, since there was no harm in trying. It would be best if he could tie a string to join them and always be able to know whether she was safe.

I wouldn’t say no to using the power I awakened in the Pleiades Watchtower, too. Situationally, of course, but……

“I still don’t really know what’s needed to activate Cor Leonis…”

Subaru’s new authority that he had developed in the Pleiades Watchtower allowed him to grasp the general location and condition of his allies. In addition, it also held the potential for Subaru to shoulder some of their burden, keeping them in peak form. If he used that power, he might even be able to share some of the burden of Rem’s leg and let her run free around the fields and mountains.

Though it would be a problem if she went someplace I couldn’t reach in the process……

“…Why did you suddenly look so depressed?”

“Nothing, just a bit of self-loathing.”

Subaru sighed, putting a hand to his dejected face.

He had thought it. He had thought that the limitations of her leg were keeping her from easily escaping him, not letting her easily break relations with him.

He had thought himself fortunate because Rem was not in her best form.

“This is why Rem can’t trust me.”

He was, at all times, just thinking of himself. He wanted to become kinder. To be a kinder, wiser, stronger person. A person who could work hard for the sake of everyone. He had taken another close look at himself in the tower, and he was still lacking.

—I can't reclaim the Subaru Natsuki that Rem believed in.

"Umm…?"

"Sorry. Anyway, we'll be back soon. I can't bear not having you around."

"…That again."

"Ugh, it is true, though… If it's creepy, I'll try to keep it to myself."

"I will not stop you."

Subaru's shoulders slumped, and he reflected on his failures beneath her cold gaze.

Of course, I don't want to bother her or make her feel creeped out, but that's just how powerful the feelings welling up inside me are.

But there was also the fact that whatever he said, he had let Rem down.

"Please wait for me. I'll do my best to bring a good report back."

"…Yes. I will pin my hopes on the efforts of Abel, Medium, and Talitta."

"I get not including Al, but what about me?"

It was just a clarification to be sure, but Rem's eyes were no warmer than before.

Still, he must have looked particularly despondent at that answer, because after some silence, Rem sighed in resignation.

"If the question is whether I believe you or not, your stench has become quite a bit better."

"That doesn't technically answer whether you believe in me or not, does it…?"

"I cannot accustom myself to that wicked stench, but

that is not the problem.”

There was a faint distrust in her pale blue eyes that refused to go out.

They would be separated temporarily. Her distrust—even knowing he had caused it himself through his failures here in Guaral, he wanted to at least do something to reverse it.

Less for himself and more for the sake of Rem’s feelings as she waited in this town.

“Please tell me, Rem. If there’s anything I can do, I will do my best to achieve it. What can I do to resolve your anxiety or unease or whatever it is?”

“…If that’s the case, then why are you still dressed like that?”

“Eh?!”

Subaru looked down at himself.

A long black wig, powder to cover the cuts and bruises, an outfit carefully chosen not to be too tight or revealing, accessories that were not too gaudy…

“Is there something that looks wrong…?”

“One of the strangest parts of all this is how none of it looks wrong. Another is, why are you dressing like that again, even though you are leaving Guaral? What is your excuse?”

“I mean, I already explained why this is necessary, didn’t I?!”

Watching the temperature drop in Rem’s gaze by the second, he half screamed while still dressed as Natsumi Schwartz.

It was completely unexpected to him that this getup would be a cause for her distrust, but as he had just said, there was a real reason for it.

“Like I told you yesterday, we’re from a neighboring country to this one. If my real name became known, it would cause trouble in both of them. So it’s necessary to have Natsumi Schwartz get the credit rather than the real me…!”

“Haah. You don’t say.”

“You still don’t believe me at all!!!”

Rem’s eyes were no less cold. If anything, the distrust had actually grown. However, this was a plan he had developed after genuine consideration of both the position he was in and the role set for him.

—I can’t go making a name for Subaru Natsuki in Volakia.

Emilia was an important figure in Lugunica, and Subaru Natsuki was her knight. That made what he was doing now a splendid interference in the internal affairs of a foreign country.

“No, there probably isn’t anything splendid about that, but still…”

Either way, the key point was that the responsibility for Subaru’s actions and their results did not just lie with him. Bluntly speaking, he might well be causing a lot of trouble for Emilia. As her knight, Subaru had sworn to help her on her path to become the ruler of Lugunica, so he could not allow himself to drag her down.

“That’s why Natsumi Schwartz. If Natsumi builds a reputation, it won’t cause any problems. Natsumi can just be a handsome young girl with black hair who suddenly appeared in Volakia.”

“Have you finished your excuses?”

“Not yet! The other calculation is that…with the name ‘Natsumi Schwartz,’ there is a possibility that our comrades in Lugunica might make the connection.”

In fact, that was the biggest reason he had settled on the alias “Natsumi Schwartz.” This episode in Volakia was not the first time he had donned women’s clothes and used that name. For a show at the Roswaal Manor—or more accurately, pressed by the necessities of the moment—he had cross-dressed there before, too, so everyone other than Emilia knew about it.

He had used the same alias then, which meant that if

Subaru's reputation and fame grew in Volakia, as Abel hoped, if the name that spread was "Natsumi Schwartz," then Emilia and the others would get at least a chance to realize that he and Rem had been sent flying off to Volakia.

And so…

"It's out of necessity that I'm dressing like this."

"……Very well."

It had taken a long time, but it was a relief to gain Rem's understanding.

Anyway, because of that, Subaru was going to keep cross-dressing for a while. *I don't want to push it too long and lose even more credibility with Rem, but it'll have to come down to the situation.*

"Rem, if you are ever feeling troubled, then try talking to Flop or Zikr. Or if it's hard to talk to a guy, then Mizelda and them would be fine, too. Don't try to carry it all yourself."

"That rings hollow coming from you, but I will heed the advice… As for you, please try not to cause trouble for Abel, Medium, and the others."

"I'll do my best for most of them."

While Medium and Talitta were one thing, he had no intention of going out of his way to spare Abel.

It'll do him some good to break down that smooth look and have to sweat it out and struggle some.

Covering all of those points out of a reluctance to part, the time to leave drew close.

"Rem, what about her?"

"Louis? She is playing with Utakata at the moment, I imagine……"

"I see."

"…So it wasn't that you wanted me to call her over."

Rem's tone dropped, and she looked at him with probing eyes.

She had guessed Subaru's intentions, but it was hardly a pleasant mood. If anything, there was a heavy undertone of

annoyance and bitterness in her voice.

Ever since the defense of the city hall, things had been busy, and he'd had no chance to interact with her, but Subaru's suspicions of Louis remained just as strong as ever. If anything, he was sure they would never fade.

Even if she grew close to Rem and Utakata and seemed to do well with the rest of the Shudrak, there was no telling when or where she might reveal her true nature.

In that sense, he was also nervous about leaving Louis behind, too.

"I did at least talk to Kuna and them about not letting their guard down."

"Stubborn, pigheaded…"

Subaru thought for a moment when he heard that murmur.

At first, he had not told Rem about Louis's true nature and dangerous ability because he thought it would just hurt his credibility, given that he had no grounds for her to believe him.

But what about now? Our relations have improved. She is still cold, but she is willing to listen to me. If I talked to her about Louis's true nature, maybe she wouldn't outright reject it?

"…No, quit it with the stupid ideas."

Shaking his head, he rejected the idea that had faintly sprung up in his mind.

Maybe he could get her to believe him, but even if he did, there was nothing to be done. Louis had not let anything slip even once so far. It was hard to imagine she would reveal herself now, once he talked to Rem about it. It would change nothing.

All it would do was make Subaru feel better in exchange for making Rem worry more.

There's no reason to do something like that.

"…What is that expression?"

"Ah, just thinking how much I hope happiness and good

tidings will bless you and your life.”

“Hah?”

Rem’s gaze sharpened as Subaru did his best to restrain the thing welling up inside him. But if he tried to say something, it would just keep going, and there was no end to the things he wanted to say……

“Bro! It’s about time to go.”

Al waved as he headed over to the carriage. The carriage was apparently going to be pulled by a single horselike creature almost as big as the carriage itself—a creature called a “gale steed.”

“It is a rare creature in Volakia. Supposedly, they are only given to generals of the army…”

“Zikr lent it to us. She’s a mare, too, so it matches.”

“Matches…?”

Rem cocked her head, seemingly not grasping the meaning of Subaru’s words.

Whatever our current relationship, she’s here, alive and healthy and up and about. For better or for worse. I’m gonna have to leave this slice of happiness for a while.

“Hey, Bro?”

“Umm, Al is calling you.”

“Mm, yeah. I know, just…”

“—?”

“I can’t get the soles of my feet to leave the ground. It’s so hard to leave your si—ow, ow, ow, ow!”

The head of the cane jabbed into Subaru’s back, lifting the soles of his shoes from the ground. Pushed forward a few steps in the process, a gap opened between him and Rem.

A real, true distance between them.

“I know I’m repeating myself, but—”

“I will be careful. I will be cautious. If I am troubled, I will rely on someone. Farewell.”

“Ugh…”

Subaru slumped in disappointment at such a perfunctory

good-bye. Watching him, Rem heaved a sigh.

“Haaah. Be careful. I will be waiting for you to come back.”

“Ah…”

“I will not suddenly disappear… I trust everyone other than you.”

Subaru carefully digested that added statement. And then, shaking his head several times, seeing Rem grimace distastefully—

“I’ll be back!”

He waved grandly to Rem, who saw him off.

6

The carriage passed into the distance, through the main gate of the city, and disappeared.

The carriage was heading to a town in the southeast, the Demon City of Chaosflame—the stronghold for one of the strongest people in all of the empire, with the question of whether they could successfully convince her at the heart of the matter.

To be honest, Rem still questioned the wisdom of bringing Subaru if the goal was to persuade someone.

“…I am sure anyone would acknowledge that he is earnest, but…”

Leaning on her cane, Rem narrowed her eyes as she followed the path of the carriage that had disappeared from view.

Subaru had not been serious during the entire good-bye. He had provided all sorts of excuses, but Rem could only believe that he simply didn’t want to stop cross-dressing.

Of course, that did not mean she also believed all his excuses were entirely false, either.

“So they’ve left? Without that noisome bunch, the air will clear at least a little in this city. Whether they will return

with good news or Abel's head remains to be seen."

"Ms. Priscilla."

Suddenly, there was a voice from behind Rem. Before she had a chance to turn around, a beautiful woman who embodied the color red leisurely came up beside her—she wore an extravagant dress and did not hesitate in exposing her violently beautiful figure.

Rem had not had a proper conversation with her ever since being saved from Arakiya's rampage in the city hall, which was why she felt a great sense of confusion and bewilderment at being addressed so suddenly.

"…Umm, thank you very much."

"Hmph. With regard to what are you expressing gratitude?"

"The events in the city hall yesterday. You saved me from that woman called 'Arakiya.' Not just me, everyone. Thanks to you…"

"Many lives were saved? I would say that the feat of saving their lives lies with you. You used your talent and saved those on the verge of death. I am not prone to such acts of mercy. Do not selfishly twist my intentions."

"I did not…"

She started to say she did not intend that, but she stopped herself. She had a bad habit of jumping to conclusions about people's actions, thoughts, and intentions, and of considering them only from her own perspective. It was not just with Priscilla. She could recognize the general outline of it.

Even though, when considering her lost memory, she had effectively only lived for two weeks.

"…I am sorry. You are correct. However, you also cannot bend the fact that I am grateful to you, can you?"

"Hoh?"

Priscilla answered with a meaningful sound and pulled the fan from between her breasts, opening it with an audible snap and hiding her neatly shaped lips behind it.

There was a delight in her eyes that she could not fully hide, a gleam of curiosity.

“I heard that you had lost yourself, but…I am surprised you would manage to talk back to me.”

“That phrasing is not quite correct. I have not lost myself; I simply cannot remember. It has not disappeared.”

Clenching her hand to her breast, Rem argued the detail.

If it had disappeared entirely, then it was no different from a fantasy that no one could reach. However, Rem’s lost memories had not disappeared. Even if they were not inside her, they existed inside Subaru, who was so desperate to get them back for her.

If his words were true, then she had an older twin sister, too. Would the Rem from before she lost her memories exist in that sister? Inside the comrades and friends that Subaru had spoken of? And inside other people she had yet to meet?

If Rem’s everything had disappeared, and she had to start from nothing, if she could just accept that…

“—If I could just convince myself of that, then my heart would not have to ache.”

“_____”

“I have no choice but to think of it constantly, every waking moment, second by second. Every time I see myself in his eyes, I am failing his expectations.”

That, of course, was not what Subaru intended.

There was a time the stench around him was so thick and terrible that she struggled to even see his form—but when she restrained herself and looked at his face, he was always earnest, and nothing more.

And that earnestness was directed at the her who had disappeared, who no longer remained inside her.

“It is so selfish. I can hardly stand myself…”

That was why she had not been able to say that she was relieved to be distant from him when he was so pained to be apart from her.

And this unsightly feeling, that was not just relief.

“—What is your name?”

“Eh?”

“Your name. Did you lose your sense of self and your name at the same time? I believe I’ve heard otherwise. If I recall, it was…”

Priscilla looked up, searching for an answer in the sky.

Most likely, she remembered Rem’s name. It was just a short time, but Rem could sense that she possessed an extraordinary intellect. At the same time, she was also a sadistic person.

And so…

“My name is Rem.”

Before she could intentionally say an incorrect name, Rem said the name herself. Having lost her memories, with no signs of them returning, and with the one person who knew the past her currently away, she had still come to believe that, at the very least, the name she had been called during these two weeks was real.

“Interesting,” Priscilla murmured.

And then she shut her fan with an audible click and tilted Rem’s chin up using the tip of it. Pierced by those crimson eyes, Rem could feel the heat parching her throat. But even if she could not put it into words, she looked back with spirited eyes.

“Rem, I will keep you by my side for a little while.”

“…By your side?”

“You have the grounding and the spirit, but you are lacking in ability. I will reforge that unsightly healing magic to an adequate level. With that, it will become at least a little more bearable, I suppose.”

“—! You’ll teach me healing magic?”

“Fool. I do not have the necessary affinity for healing magic. I simply have a discerning eye for beauty. I can tell at a glance what you are lacking.”

Her answer was not exactly what Rem had hoped for, but

at the same time, it was also more than she had dared hope.

If Rem was going to make use of her only skill at present, the ability to heal others, then there was value in relying on Priscilla's words. She had just been wishing she had more power.

"However, are you not returning to your own base, Ms. Priscilla?"

"I changed my mind. That fool Al went with Abel, too. It will not be long before the results of the challenge I set are known. I will wait here. It is inconvenient…but I shall deal with that by summoning Schult."

"Ah, ahh…"

Something had apparently struck a chord, leading Priscilla to decide to remain in Guaral. Whatever the reason, if she could learn from her, Rem would gladly accept it.

There were still many in this city who needed Rem's crude healing magic. She could not abandon them and leave the city.

"With that settled, prepare my room. Schult will handle the details, but do not inconvenience me today or tomorrow."

"U-understood. I shall prepare a room right away."

She made that demand as if she owned the city, but Rem obeyed without feeling an urge to argue. Partly, it was the fact that Priscilla had an air about her that made others obey her, whether they wanted to or not, but also, Rem did not feel any resistance at being ordered to do something she believed she should do.

Hurrying back to the city hall with the help of her cane, she thought that she needed to speak with Zikr about providing a room for Priscilla during her stay.

She felt bad about relying on him for so much, but the Shudrak were unaccustomed to living in a city.

He was the sort of man who would never say no to a

woman asking him for help, but even so.

“Ah, Reh, I found you.”

“Utakata.”

On her way through the building to the office where she was sure Zikr would be, she ran into Utakata, who was peering out the window in the hall.

“I’m sorry, I’m in a bit of a rush.”

“Uu is fine. I’m worried about Ta. She’s wobbly.”

“Talitta is…yes…”

Tasked with serving as the new chief, Talitta had accompanied Subaru and the others. Even in the eyes of one so young as Utakata, Talitta looked unsteady, as if she might be crushed by the great burden she was so suddenly given. But even so, she was splendid, facing her troubles earnestly and with resolve.

While Rem was cowering and cursing her powerlessness, everyone around her was leaving her behind, which was all the more reason she did not want to keep whining and cursing her fate and dragging everyone down.

“I am sure Talitta is fine. So we should work on protecting this place for her to return to.”

“Mm, got it! I’m counting on you, Reh.”

“R-really? Hearing you say that is a little reassuring.”

Utakata’s plain and simple words brought a faint smile to Rem’s lips. Then, sensing something off, she looked around. Utakata was standing in the passage, looking out the window alone. There was no sign of the girl who was always with her.

“Utakata, are you alone? What about Louis?”

They were children of a similar age, so they had apparently built an amiable friendship. That was a relief, and Rem had been leaving Louis to her own devices a lot lately because of that, but…

“Louis isn’t with you?”

“Mhm! Lou went with them.”

“…Huh?”

Rem froze, her head still cocked in confusion.

The next instant, she turned pale, and her thoughts ground to a halt as she tried desperately to get her head moving. She tried to confirm what Utakata meant. Louis was not with her, meaning that……

“L-Louis is…”

“With them! I helped her get into the carriage.”

The daring, dauntless Shudrak girl’s chest swelled with pride, explaining what she had done without a trace of guilt.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHAOTIC DEMON CITY

1

The carriage proceeded down the road, though not in a slow, pastoral sense.

The gale steed's large chestnut body swayed, pulling their carriage with a delicacy that belied her burly frame.

"As expected of Zikr's trusted…lady… Or rather, Leidy."

Subaru watched her gallant form while pondering Zikr's providentially named mare.

Regardless, with Leidy's efforts, they were proceeding at a good pace on the road to Chaosflame. So long as nothing happened, they would reach their destination in about four days.

"But the real work begins once we arrive… Just what sort of chaos awaits, I wonder."

"Chaos, huh? Speakin' of that, this carriage is in a pretty dire state of chaos as it is, your appearance included."

Subaru was sitting in the front seat of the spacious carriage, watching Leidy cantor along. He turned, holding his long black hair as it fluttered in the wind.

The gesture caused Al to exhale where he was sitting with a slovenly posture in the back.

"You definitely got those womanly charms down pat, but seeing you do it so naturally is gonna drive me crazy."

"The devil is in the details, isn't it? Are you still being

prickly about it?”

Al waved his hand in annoyance. Surprisingly, he was second only to Rem in disapproving of Subaru’s cross-dressing.

Abel, the Shudrak, the O’Connell siblings, and Zikr had all treated him normally once they had accepted it, but Al continued to dwell and grumble about it.

“You’re the one who said you were supporting me. Or was all of that strange exchange a lie?”

“This and that are different things. Supporting you isn’t the same as going all in on your cross-dressing. I had assumed that was just something you were doing to sneak into the city.”

“If you’re my ally, then I would like it if you acknowledged me as I am.”

“So are you calling that getup ‘you as you are’ now? Seriously?”

When he put it like that, even Subaru had to admit it sounded ridiculous.

He had recreated the image of Natsumi Schwartz using a wig and makeup, but unlike last time with the dancing girl outfit, the role asked of him now was something more intellectual. And so he had adjusted his clothing and makeup to create an impression more along those lines.

The mostly red collared outfit was the uniform of a commissioned officer of the Volakian Empire—an outfit based on the one worn by Zikr. He was wearing pants and heavy boots, and a feathered soldier’s cap. A pretty flashy sort of look, if he did say so himself.

That was the complete form of the female strategist, Natsumi Schwartz.

“Well, the impression is more of a female officer, I guess. I mean, that’s the classic, right? A woman serving while cross-dressing as a guy?”

“So you’re cross-dressing as a woman who’s cross-dressing as a guy? I’m sinkin’ into chaos here just trying to

read this script.”

“I don’t want to draw too much bad attention, so I followed imperial styles. It’s a male outfit, so I also took a hint from Crusch’s style.”

“The way you put it, like you were collecting ideas from all of your encounters, I gotta wonder how excited that duchess would be to hear it. What do you think, Abel dear?”

Listening to Subaru’s design presentation, Al shifted his target, giving up on the debate, much to Subaru’s chagrin. The conversation turned instead to the fugitive emperor sitting in the middle of the carriage, grimly looking out the window. He furrowed his brow at Al’s overly intimate address.

“Jester,” he answered, without turning. “It is certainly an absurd outfit, but so long as he gets results, I will not comment on it. Ability is something that should be considered independent of a person’s interests and proclivities.”

“Is that how it is…? Well, I’ll be careful about my grumbling, then.”

Al nodded at Abel’s straightforward critique, while not addressing the rocky distance between them. Relieved that the mood did not worsen, Subaru glared at Abel.

“Don’t act like you’ve got my back just to stab me in it. Don’t make me repeat myself; this isn’t about my interests or proclivities, it’s about necessity. Do you think I’m doing this just ’cause I want to cross-dress?”

“_____”

“Don’t clam up!”

That meaningful silence just deepened the unfair suspicions lingering over Subaru.

Of course, it was a terrible position to be in. If he did not have to do this, he would have avoided it like his life depended on it. But it was an effective means of getting his point across, so he had no choice.

“Every last one of you…I have a real argument, so

listen.”

“That’s a bit much. But an emperor driven from the throne and a mysterious woman aiding him… It definitely feels iconic for this sort of story.”

“See, you get it. Stories like this have to have just that kind of heroine…but I’m not the heroine!”

“Don’t get mad when you’re the one who said it. You’re gonna confuse everyone.”

Subaru erupted righteously, but no one other than Al could possibly understand what he was referring to. In fact, it was the sort of narrative structure plenty of people back in his original world might not get.

……I never did get around to asking what era he came from.

He’d had the feeling for a while that the knowledge and common sense Al possessed meant he had come from a generation pretty close to Subaru’s. When they first met, he had told Subaru it had been almost twenty years since he was summoned to this world.

And also that he had run into disaster while he still didn’t understand anything and had ended up losing an arm in the process. The confession itself had been lighthearted, but the event must have been anything but. Al had surely experienced anguish and despair far harsher than Subaru had felt.

If it was twenty years ago, then he would have been summoned to this world at around the same age as Subaru. Maybe that was why, even with the age difference, he and Subaru seemed to communicate on such a similar wavelength.

He thought that the faint twinge he felt when interacting with him was because of that.

“Speaking of the usual, though.”

“Huh?”

“A shady magic user beside the emperor… Isn’t that also part of the standard package? What about that part?”

Al’s banter drew Subaru back from the side alley his thoughts had started drifting down. Blinking, Subaru nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I guess it is standard. A bewitching woman enticing the emperor, gradually turning him into her puppet…and then bringing down a proud and flourishing country.”

“Do not casually foretell the collapse of whole nations. Whatever may come, I will retake it with my own hands. However…”

“However?”

“He was neither a magic user nor a woman, but there was one called a Stargazer.”

“‘“Stargazer?”’”

Subaru and Al both questioned the term Abel suddenly spoke. It was something Subaru had never heard before, but oddly, he could imagine what the role entailed based on the root words.

“Is that like a sort of feng shui master…? Some sort of fortune teller?”

“More like a prophet, isn’t it? There’s the stone in the kingdom, too.”

“Ah, right, the Dragon Tablet…”

Al’s comment reminded Subaru of the prophetic tablet used in Lugunica. He had not seen the real thing himself, but apparently, it had future events that would occur in the kingdom written on it, and it even had the method for resolving issues written on it, too. A handy artifact to have.

However, with the kingdom facing an unprecedented danger in the form of an outbreak of disease, the solution offered by the tablet was the selection of the next ruler—in other words, it had opened the royal selection that Emilia, Priscilla, and the others had joined.

Honestly, it’s a result that makes me wonder why it’s so highly regarded.

“If you really think it’s for the sake of the country, then

just say how to cure the disease…”

Something he had learned as he grew more engrossed in his role as knight to one of the candidates was that Lugunica’s royal family did not behave tyrannically or have any particularly feeble-minded aspects. They were, at the very least, well-loved by the people. Their retainers and most of their subjects grieved their deaths, and no one celebrated their passing. The reason why the Dragon Tablet abandoned them was shrouded in mystery.

“It’s just a slab of stone, so it’s not like you’ll ever get an answer.”

“Yeah, if it’s a slab of stone, but this Stargazer’s different, right? What sort of role do they have in the palace, our lovely Abel?”

“…Your understanding is not far removed from the truth. The power of the Stargazer is to peer at tomorrow in order to maintain the empire.”

Abel’s answer was pretty much in line with the feeling Subaru had gotten from the name. But there was one big problem with it.

“…But they didn’t predict very well, did they? You got kicked off the throne and all.”

“Did I not say the Stargazer’s power exists to maintain the empire? That is not necessarily compatible with my own safety.”

“…That…that would mean you getting driven out is better for the empire, then.”

“At the very least, it would mean the Stargazer judged it so.”

Subaru felt something off in Abel’s calm response.

The stone tablet and the Stargazer… There were differences in the kingdom and empire, but they held similar roles, and they could both be seen to have forsaken the highest and most respected positions in their various countries.

Am I overthinking it if it feels like there’s something at

work behind the scenes here?

“Whatever the Stargazer might see in tomorrow, my answer remains the same.”

“_____”

“Even if the Stargazer should judge that I must not be placed on the throne, I will not obey. If the Stargazer spins a verse of the empire’s destruction due to my presence, I will overturn it with my own two hands.”

He was calm, yet there was a faint intensity in Abel’s declaration. It was the same sort of passion as when he spoke of reclaiming the throne, the one line that Abel would not yield, an unshakable belief. It was not simple anger or revenge; it was a core belief, something much larger and purer. So Subaru did not doubt Abel’s final line.

If possible, he would appreciate him being a bit more considerate about everything else, though.

“—Ah! Everyone! Look, up ahead! There!”

“Huh?”

Just as the conversation was settling, there was a shout from the driver’s seat, where Medium was holding the reins. She was enthusiastically calling their attention.

Apparently, she had never gotten to hold the reins while traveling with Flop, so she had volunteered for the seat out front. Her tall body sat neatly on the driver’s bench as she pointed out at the road.

“It looks like things are getting noisy up ahead! Can you see it, Natsumi?”

“Umm… I see something smaller than a speck…I think.”

Squinting through the window, he could not really confirm the noisy thing or whatever it was Medium was talking about. Not because of an issue with her description, but because her vision was just that much better.

Subaru still had 20/10 vision, but as a rule, people in this world had vision like the eagle-eyed nomadic groups back in his. Emilia probably had more like 20/5 vision or better.

“What about you, Talitta? Can you see it?”

“Please wait. That is…”

Setting aside his own inferior vision, Subaru looked up at the roof of the carriage. Talitta was on top, on guard for threats from all directions.

She had volunteered for the role, not feeling comfortable without some sort of job to do, but Subaru was used to Garfiel, who liked to do the same sort of thing, so he had readily accepted the offer.

When Talitta applied her extraordinary Amazon vision to the task…

“…It seems imperial soldiers are gathered, stopping oxcarts from proceeding forward.”

“That’s…”

“—An inspection,” Abel murmured, grasping the meaning of Talitta’s report.

Hearing that, Subaru thought back to the situation at the gate into Guaral, but in this case, it was not the entrance to a city but the middle of a road. Unlike surveillance going into a city, the unnatural position and timing made this stand out.

Long story short, there was a good reason to suspect this inspection was set up to catch something in particular.

“Could it be us? Arakiya escaped; maybe word has gone out?”

“Of course, there is no escaping information leaking at some point from Arakiya. However, I doubt that she could move this quickly or precisely. In addition, the Demon City is in the other direction from the capital.”

“Meaning it’s too soon for a report to reach there geographically?”

“That is right… However, there is the problem of her companion.”

With arms crossed, Abel pondered not Arakiya but the one accompanying her—the shrewd person who had managed to break her out of Guaral.

“_____”

Subaru grimaced, getting a bad feeling.

If we're limiting it to soldiers who were in Guaral, then I have an idea of someone shrewd enough to fit the bill. And he wasn't there among the soldiers who surrendered.

I'd like to hope he just abandoned the city and blended in with the soldiers running away, but……

"It can't be, can it?"

He just did not want to imagine it was he who had broken Arakiya out. If possible, he would rather never meet that man again. *—He's someone I'd rather have nothing to do with.*

"… For now, we should focus on the problem in front of us. What should we do? Can we go around it?"

"If we act now, I don't think they have noticed us yet, but…"

Medium and Talitta, the two with the best vision, were looking down the road. If they acted before the soldiers noticed, they had the option of avoiding them. If there was nothing dangerous to be found by a search, they could also just pass straight through, but as someone who was getting an ulcer even before the search happened, that was not an option to take.

"—Wait. Don't avoid it."

However, none other than Abel made the decision before Subaru could give the order to leave the road. Subaru turned, questioning a direction that did not seem very wise.

"Huh?"

"I want to know their goal. If the fall of Guaral is the reason, then their movement is too quick. If they are searching for me, then I want to learn what instructions the soldiers have been given."

"Still, though, what if they find you? Go around poking the beehive and you'll end up in a fast and furious car chase."

Of course, there was always the possibility of getting arrested on the spot without the chase, too.

Of the five people in the carriage, there were three who could fight—all but Subaru and Abel—but the overall fighting strength was not that different from when they had slipped into Guaral as dancing girls. It would be wiser to avoid drawing too much attention.

“The conditions are too bad. Or do you have some sort of good trick up your sleeve?”

“I do. You.”

Going through the pros and cons, Subaru heard his voice crack when he was suddenly called out.

We were talking about chances of success on this reckless gamble, weren’t we……?

“So what are you getting at, bringing me up?”

“There is already the prior example of Guaral. The carriage is disguised to hide the fact that it is military equipment. Simply behave as we planned.”

“But that’s just a backstory for appearances on the road, right?!”

Abel’s brazen suggestion was the general backstory they had agreed on for talking with other travelers or merchants they met on the road, not something designed to fool imperial soldiers on guard and paying close attention.

And yet Abel refused to heed Subaru’s pleading shriek.

“I will hide in the bottom of the carriage. You get the soldiers to talk.”

“*Ghh*, wait, wait, are you serious?!”

“Don’t let them look in the bottom of the carriage. Surely you do not wish to die, either.”

“I don’t know how you can act so high-and-mighty…!”

Even as he said that, Abel had already stood up and put his hand on the floor. There was a plank that could be removed beneath the seat, allowing access to a space in the bottom of the carriage. It was a carriage originally intended to be drawn by General Second-Class Zikr’s gale steed. It was disguised to not be recognizably military in nature, but its functions, befitting someone of authority,

remained. *I doubt whoever made it expected the emperor to be the one hiding in it, though.*

Either way, Abel quickly slipped himself into the tight space beneath the floorboard. He was serious about leaving the task to Subaru. It was more arrogant than daring.

“Natsumi, they’ve noticed us!”

“Guess there’s no choice but to do it! All right, you’ve got this, Natsumi!”

Talitta and Medium neatly robbed Subaru of any chance to hesitate. If the guards running the checkpoint had already noticed them, then turning back now would just be begging to be searched with a fine-tooth comb.

“Meaning, even if it sucks, we’ve gotta do what His Highness wants. You ready, Bro?”

Slapping his face with both hands, Subaru flicked the switch inside himself.

“Yes, yes, very well! I’ll be counting on you!”

“…That’s some crazy gear shift.”

Not too hard, though, or it will ruin the makeup. And no scratching my head; it’ll mess up the hair.

He also had to set aside his internal annoyance, or his speech would become rougher. *I can’t pass like that.*

He had to live up to everyone’s expectations and fulfill his own.

This is step one in restoring that lost trust.

“Oh, it must be such hard work for you soldiers out here. May I ask what I can do for you?”

As he convinced himself of that, he waved to the soldiers hailing the carriage, flashing a sweet smile and calling out with a cheerful voice.

2

Fortunately, the soldiers who stopped the carriage did not think much of a carriage with three women—Medium,

Talitta, and Subaru—and just one man, which was Al. All they asked was the nature of the travelers, their destination, and their goal upon reaching it.

Following the backstory they had set up beforehand—that Al and Medium were bodyguards hired to protect Subaru, the daughter of a lesser noble, and Talitta was Subaru's attendant—they had made it through the explanation.

Talitta was currently in disguise to hide her Shudrak origin, so she was cross-dressed in a butler-style outfit that fit Subaru's preferences, and Al had given the high praise of throwing his hands up in confusion.

"You're cross-dressing as a woman cross-dressing as a guy, and Talitta's cross-dressing as a guy… Man, I can't keep up with this."

When he explained the goal of their travel was for Subaru to greet another house as a proxy for "her" father, the soldiers had not been suspicious. However, they did wince upon hearing where the carriage was headed.

"The Demon City? Your father gave you a rough job. You should maybe reconsider."

"Even so, Father would be ever so upset with me. Though it is a lesser barony, one does as one must… The Demon City frightens me less than disobeying the head of the family."

"Huh, really? Well, you seem to have your head about you, so I guess you won't need to worry too much."

"Dear me, you are so kind."

Subaru smiled sweetly and put his hands to his mouth, elegantly evading the soldier's suspicions. Gathering that making it through the inspection without issue would not be a problem, Subaru decided to get a bit greedy.

"Still, though, it is concerning having a checkpoint on the road here… Has something happened?"

"Nah, nothing too important. There have been reports of desertions after skirmishes in the north of Badheim, so

we’re just keeping an eye out…and also looking for a wanted criminal.”

“A wanted criminal?”

Careful not to let his caution show on the surface, Subaru played the part of the anxious young daughter of a well-to-do family. Totally fooled by the performance, the guard nodded with an earnest look.

“Yes, truth is, there was a report of a man wanted in the capital who was seen around here. You wouldn’t happen to have noticed a man about fifty years old with blue hair, would you?”

“…No, unfortunately, I haven’t. However, to think there would be deserters among the elite soldiers of the empire… It’s worrying to think a fall breeze might be descending upon the empire.”

“Don’t worry, Natsumi! You’ve got us, so you don’t have to worry!”

“Oh, Medium! You’re so reassuring. Oh-ho-ho-ho.”

It was unintentional, but Medium’s openhearted reassurance even brought a smile to the soldier’s lips. Subaru had been concerned about drawing suspicion for probing too much, but they had dodged that bullet, too, it seemed. Talitta was silent, acting the role of the faithful butler—though it might just be stage fright keeping her from speaking.

And Subaru preemptively squashed any suspicions of the one guy in the party, Al.

“Being a bodyguard is just in name only… His pride has earned that much. The truth is, he lost his arm serving our family.”

The guard had initially been suspicious, but at hearing Subaru’s explanation, his eyes filled with sympathy. Since they, too, risked life and limb in the line of duty, a permanent wound like that was not something they could shrug off easily.

And so…

“Impressive show, Natsumi! I’m amazed!”

Waving at the soldiers shrinking in the distance, Medium complimented Subaru from the driver’s seat.

“Not at all.” Subaru shook his head. “I did not do much. Fortunately, the reason for their inspection had nothing to do with us. We should be grateful for our good luck.”

“Really? Then maybe that’s it. Bro does say I’m really lucky a lot!”

“Heh-heh, you and Flop are geniuses at finding happiness.”

Putting his hand to his cheek, Subaru smiled at Medium’s pleasant response. And then he turned to Talitta in the seat beside him, who looked totally exhausted. The nerves had eased, but she still looked unwell.

“Talitta.” Subaru cocked his head. “Are you all right? Is there a problem?”

“No, no problem…but how can you be so confident, Natsumi? I’ve wondered that ever since the plan to sneak in as dancers.”

“…Indeed…”

After Abel, Talitta was the one who had the most experience with Subaru cross-dressing. However, she had apparently struggled to understand the way he changed all this time.

Unlike Abel and Flop—Bianca and Flora—who did not really change themselves, Subaru needed the help of careful auto-suggestion to play the role of Natsumi Schwartz. It was a skill developed by those who did not have the natural material to fully pass with clothes and makeup alone. Effort was required in order to close that gap.

“I simply did the best I could.”

Natsumi Schwartz’s level of completeness was the result of humanity’s research into beauty. Without trailblazers before him, Subaru’s cross-dressing would be something that would not pass muster even at a school arts festival.

There was no denying that what made it work was the effort of countless people before him.

"…I'm jealous of that self-confidence. It's not something I have."

"It is not self-confidence…… What I have is faith in Natsumi Schwartz. That is something different from self-confidence."

"Eh? Huh?"

"Give it a rest, Bro, you're confusing Talitta. Even I'm struggling to keep up with that passionate cross-dressing spirit."

With Talitta's eyes spinning, Al called a time-out on Subaru's opinionating.

I don't think I said anything so difficult that it would confuse them. It is simply that, while it might be difficult to believe in one's self, the ideal you create within yourself can be easier to believe in.

"I am always envisioning my best self."

"I-I've come to understand that is a difficult perspective for me…"

"I would really recommend it as a general mindset. Comparing yourself to someone you look up to is difficult in its own way…but it is possible to sketch out an ideal self."

"_____"

Talitta's eyes widened a bit, seeing Subaru put his hand to his chest as he spoke earnestly. It seemed to have resonated with her at least a bit.

"Sketch an ideal self…"

She seemed to be quietly filing it away in her mind. At least, that was how it seemed from the look on her face as she fell silent.

"Still, though." Al changed the topic. "Deserters aside, what was that about a wanted man? It's a big help that word about him hasn't gotten out yet, but that was something."

"I don't know…a man around fifty years old with blue

hair. There are quite a number of gentlemen who would fit that description, I imagine. Even I can think of some."

Blue was not a natural color for hair in his original world, but in this one, it was a color that popped up here and there, Rem being a prime example. The soldier's description would even match the heavy-drinking mercenary—Luoann—he had turned to for help once in a past loop in Guaral. However, he did not seem to be enough of a person of interest to spur the deployment of soldiers, so it was surely someone else with a similar appearance they were after.

"Either way, it seems Abel's situation has not been shared with the lower-level soldiers…… Given there is no panic in the capital, it seems safe to assume the body double is successfully passing as the emperor."

"That's one of those things where it's hard to say if it is good or bad. Honestly, it feels like it might be better for us if there was a big uproar about the emperor being missing."

"There are pluses and minuses either way, I suppose. What would happen if he was discovered aside, it would not change the intensity of the search."

If the emperor's disappearance became public and caused a big uproar, there was still no guarantee they could ride that wave smoothly. At the very least, Abel's understanding was that they would be lacking in fighting power if he announced himself, and Subaru was inclined to agree.

He had been incredibly on edge at being told to fake his way through the checkpoint, though.

"Anyway, we made it through, so should we spring him?"

"Indeed. I would like to register my complaints with the man."

Nodding at Al's suggestion, Subaru crossed his arms beneath his false cleavage and made his indignation known.

The source of his anger was, of course, partly being forced to deal with the inspection, but the bigger reason was because Abel had been rummaging around during the middle of it. There had been several thuds from down below during the discussion with the soldier. In the end, Subaru had to play the part of a starving young girl and commiserate about things being hard even for a minor noble, which was a blemish on the elegant and brilliant Natsumi Schwartz's reputation.

"His Highness the Emperor would seem not to be sufficiently aware of his position."

"C'mon, Bro, don't get mad. Though, that was bad enough that I do think it's fair to be mad."

Al was generally in agreement with Subaru's intent to give the reckless emperor a piece of his mind. When Al flipped up the wooden plank, Subaru peered down at the floor of the swaying carriage, ready to talk the man's ear off.

"What was all that about, Abel? Do you know how much we struggled to cover for—?"

"*Uuu!*"

"*Uhyaaaa?!*"

The rest of his complaint was drowned out by a scream. Subaru leaped into Talitta's arms. She reflexively grabbed him in a princess carry, but he did not have the presence of mind to compliment her powerful core.

What had appeared from below the board was not mind-addled Abel—it was a young little girl with long blond hair. She was a familiar face and a terrible memory made manifest.

Louis Arneb, the prime example of weirdness since coming to the empire, cheerfully leaped out from below.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh…?"

"*Aaa, uuu?*"

"Why?! Why are you here……?!"

"…It seems she hid away beneath the floor. To think no

one would notice until now. This is likely the work of Utakata.”

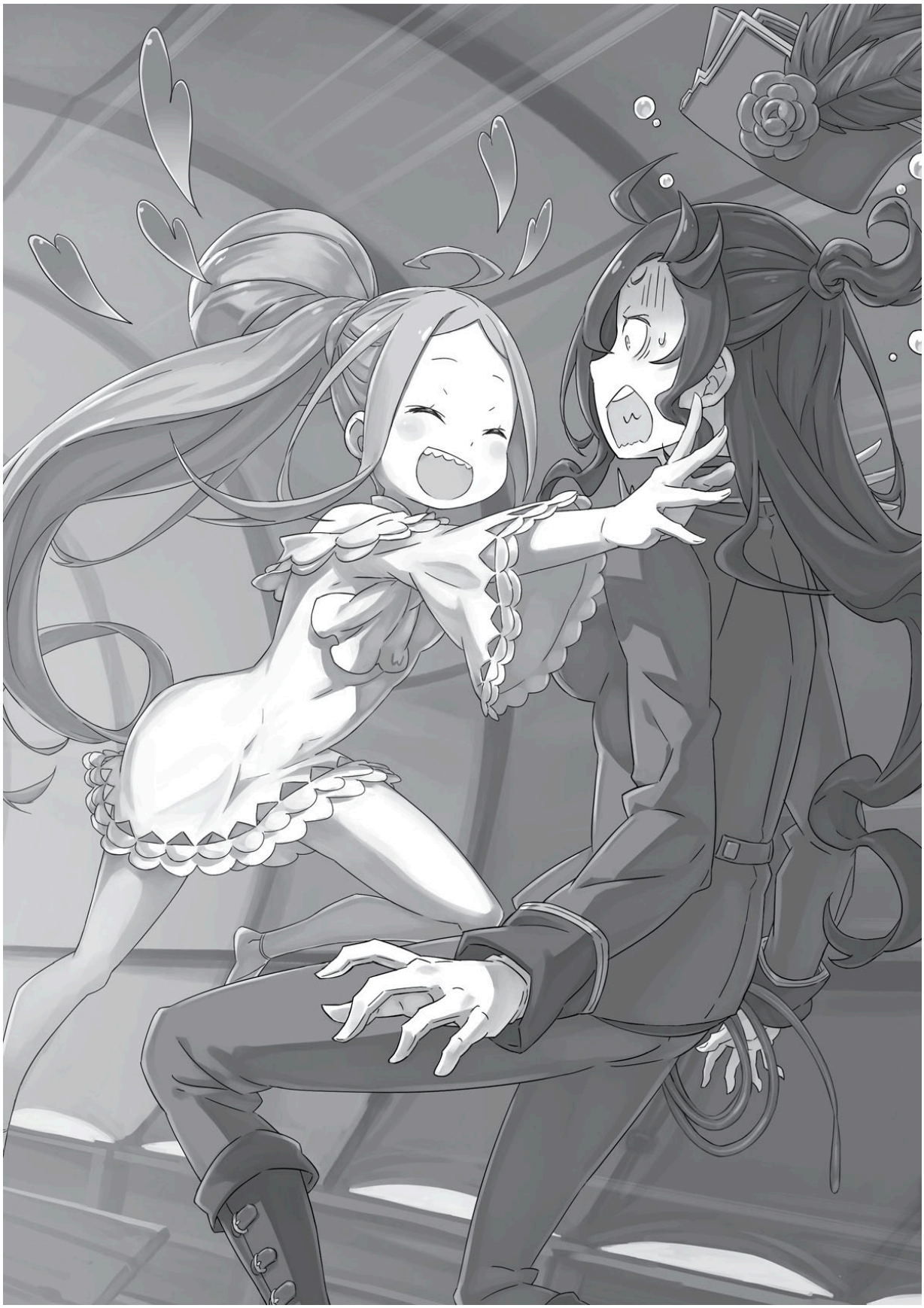
Subaru’s eyes spun, and his voice trembled. His questions were answered by Abel, who appeared from below after Louis. Brushing the dust off his dirty traveling garb, he ran his fingers through his badly mussed black hair, and then, seeing Louis toddling toward Subaru, who was still sitting in Talitta’s arms……

“Hmph, you seem to be quite beloved, since she chose to be with you rather than Utakata or your woman.”

“How are you so calm…and you mean you were fine down there with her?”

“Why would I be fine? Even I was concerned at such unnecessary rummaging beneath the floor. If she was the reason I was discovered by the soldiers, I was wondering what sort of excuse you would make,” Abel said, while putting the secret panel back.

Everything clicked for Subaru when he heard that explanation. The one making all the noise down there was Louis, who had apparently snuck on board. When he went down to hide, Louis, who had been there first, had probably gotten excited.



Abel did his best, but apparently, he did not have the talent to soothe a child.

“In that case, what can you do…?”

“You are, by all accounts, forging dishonorable stories about me. What are you going to do about this?”

“What am I going to do…?”

“I should warn you, we cannot turn back now. Neither that checkpoint nor time will allow it.”

Subaru, still in Talitta’s arms, looked down at Louis with an ashen face.

“Wh-why did it end up like this……?”

Louis’s unexpected appearance set Subaru’s head spinning in bewilderment and confusion. His wariness of Louis’s thoughts and her hidden nature grew, but at the same time, he could not deny a sense of relief that he did not have to worry about leaving Rem in Guaral with her.

“There is nothing to be done now, Subaru. All we can do is bring Louis with us.”

“Even you’re saying that, Talitta?”

“Abel is right. There is no option to turn back now. But we cannot just leave Louis here. I know you and Louis have a complicated relationship, but…”

“_____”

Looking back and forth at Subaru and Louis, Talitta cautiously took a middle-ground stance.

They had spent significant time together, both infiltrating Guaral and earlier in the Shudrak village, so while it was not at the same level as Rem’s, she did know about Subaru’s wariness of Louis.

“We cannot leave her to trouble those who cannot know any better…”

“*Uuu?*”

Louis cocked her head, not understanding anything.

As of now, Louis had not once shown any trace of the Archbishop of Gluttony, but that did not mean she never would, and it was Subaru’s duty to deal with her whenever

that time came.

Subaru was the only one who grasped the danger she represented and had the opportunity to stop her before she caused any damage.

“Well, it ain’t so serious, Bro. She’s real attached to you. Yeah, she might be a problem later, but everything can be used, depending on your perspective, right?”

“Al…”

Al was trying to help Subaru make a decision in his anguish. He was intentionally keeping it lighthearted as he reached out to pat Louis’s head—

“Having a kid around might get people to let their guard down. Bringing a kid might—owww!”

“*Gauu!*”

Just as his hand was about to pat her head, Louis suddenly and truly bared her fangs. Opening her mouth wide, she bit Al’s hand. He leaped back with a howl. It was like a feral cat biting the hand trying to feed it.

“Oooooh, that really hurts! I’m bleeding! This is what I get for trying to do a good deed!”

“Y-you’ve really done it…! So this is your true nature…!”

“*Uuu! Aaaa! Aauuu!*”

“I cannot understand you like that!”

Louis started to cling to Subaru, who could not move, since he was still in Talitta’s arms. Subaru pushed her head as she cried out, but he could not really push well with the corset he was wearing.

Another round with Gluttony in the middle of a carriage like this is……

“Please calm down!”

“Hyaa?!” “*Uu?!*”

Suddenly, Talitta raised her voice above both of their shouts. Putting Subaru slowly down, she looked at the three of them with a powerful gaze that resembled her sister’s.

“A full-grown adult behaving like that with a child is

shameful! Please control yourself. What will you do if such a young child copies your behavior?”

“Ugh…b-but she is…”

“No buts, Natsumi. If you are going to call yourself a strategist, then you of all people have to be calm.”

Being so flatly scolded like that, and for such a simple and obvious thing, had the greatest effect on Subaru. Who could win against such a natural argument? But “act your age” was a naive logic that did not apply to archbishops.

If she knew how dangerous Louis was, then I’m sure……

Maybe I reveal Louis Arneb’s true nature here and now.

“_____”

The dark emotion swirling inside his breast caught in his throat. Subaru’s cheek tensed, and Talitta and Al looked at him dubiously. There was a simple way to resolve their doubts, but for some reason, he always hesitated.

All he had to do was tell them the truth and explain how serious this was. Unlike Rem, who had lost all knowledge of the Witch Cult along with her memories, they should be able to understand the menace Louis posed.

Just by doing that, this seed of discord in little girl form could be……

Could be what?

“*Uuu?*”

Louis cocked her head in confusion, looking up at Subaru, who had gone completely still. With all the noise around her suddenly quiet, Louis had settled down. The reason she had been so fussy was simply because the people around her were being loud. That adaptability was just a type of mimicry, wasn’t it?

Was this just the feigned disguise of the horrifying and irredeemably evil girl Subaru had met when he arrived in that white space in the Pleiades Watchtower?

Even though he knew he should deal with her as if that were the case…

“…To be clear, the goal of this journey is not some

amusement.”

Abel interjected coldly, the only one sitting down even as Subaru struggled with what to do.

For an instant, Subaru was confused, not grasping the intent of his words, but he quickly realized Abel was talking about what to do with Louis. There was no warmth at all in his black eyes as he warned that they weren’t on their way to a playdate. That was proof that he had found no value in treating Louis with any consideration or favor. Put another way, it gave Subaru a good idea of what choice Abel would make if he knew Louis’s true identity.

“Let’s…bring her with us.”

The black eyes observing Louis turned to Subaru. Feeling the dark, sharp gaze carving into him, Subaru ignored the imaginary pain he thought he felt in his false cleavage and glared back.

“If we are not here to play, then I will find a use for her… That’s all it means.”

“Very well. That is sufficient. I expected as much of you.”

“…That’s a difficult-to-interpret evaluation.”

He could not tell if Abel meant that in a sense of disappointment or something else. Of course, Abel would not elaborate for his sake, and Subaru dropped the subject there, not wanting to risk a different outcome by bringing it back up.

And with how to handle Louis settled for now…

“All right, Louis, wanna try holding the reins? Try playing with Leidy!”

“*Uuu!*”

“Let’s not do that!”

Louis was welcomed warmly out on the driver’s bench by the two women. Louis had learned to listen to the adults around her, and she had gotten quite attached to Medium and Talitta, so maybe there was no need to worry.

If I had to say something, though, I wonder whether Rem will panic because Louis isn’t around.

“If Utakata helped her sneak into the carriage, then I suppose that won’t be a concern… From Rem’s perspective, that might be less worrying than her disappearing without a trace.”

“What are you talking about, Bro? Obviously, she’d be more relieved this way… Then again, it does seem like there’s some history here.”

Linking Subaru’s murmur and what had just happened, Al demonstrated a bit of concern about his position. Looking down rather than meeting his gaze, Subaru hesitated for a moment.

“No…it is nothing. Al, I must make a request of you. Please watch Louis for me, if you are able?”

“…That’s one helluva way to ask, but why? Is there something about the kiddo?”

“…If she gets hurt, it will hurt Rem. So please.”

“_____”

It was a natural question from Al, but Subaru hid the truth from him, as he did with everyone else.

Al was silent for a moment, but—

“All right, got it. I’m a bit worried she’ll eat my last arm, but I can manage that.”

Al pointedly shook his bitten hand and took a seat at the front of the carriage, stretching out his legs sloppily while listening to the three girls chatting cheerfully on the driver’s bench.

It was a stance and attitude that was just like him, and Subaru’s expression softened just a bit.

He had a lot on his mind, and the closer they got to the Demon City, the more uneasy he felt.

“Oh, right, I did not receive any thanks for getting through the inspection so smoothly.”

“Hmph. Good work.”

“Was it really necessary to snort first?!” Subaru exclaimed, taking issue with the hollowness of Abel’s gratitude. Then he took a deep breath and moved away

from Abel, taking a seat at the back where Al was before.

He had a lot on his mind, but the journey to Chaosflame would not wait for him. Looking up, he saw Medium and Talitta having fun with Louis out at the front.

“Sheesh…whose fault do you think it is that I am suffering like this?”

Those grumbles went unheard, drowned out by the rattle of the carriage’s wheels.

3

“It was terrible when me and my big bro were there.”

Medium’s voice had its usual quality as they sat around the campfire that night.

The party had stopped the carriage off the side of the road and had just finished eating a basic dinner. Al and Talitta were out patrolling the surroundings while the others were watching the camp.

She was always so cheerful and bright, not even knowing how to keep her voice down. Even when she was talking about a dark, painful memory.

Subaru had already heard from Flop about the terrible environment they had been raised in. How they were raised at an orphanage where they were beaten every day, and how they resented a world where unfortunate adults perpetrated further misfortune on children, and swore to get revenge.

“Big Bro can get kinda complicated with what he says, and I don’t understand it all, though. But when I see him hold his head high and walk proudly, I want to support him.”

“Even if that means taking revenge against the whole world?”

“Yeah, yeah! As for how, I dunno, really.”

Medium sat there cross-legged, smiling bashfully. Louis

was sitting on her lap, and Medium was combing out her long blond hair with a practiced hand.

The reason the topic had turned to her past was because of how well she handled dealing with younger kids.

She gave the impression of being careless with pretty much everything, so it was surprising to see how diligently she took care of Louis. When Subaru asked why, it had led to this.

“There were other children there, too. Even ones younger than me. It wasn’t too fun, so we wanted to grow our hair out.”

“So that is the secret to why you are so good at taking care of others. That makes sense.”

“Hee-hee-hee, really? I’m glad I’m useful.”

Medium’s beautiful blond hair caught the orange light of the fire. She was a huge help to Subaru on this trip, both mentally and in terms of fighting power.

If it weren’t for her and Flop, Subaru’s itinerary through the empire would have been far more difficult.

“Medium, where are you and your brother from?”

Abel, also sitting at the fire, suddenly spoke up. He had not returned to the carriage after dinner, instead staying and listening to Medium’s recollections. Though Subaru had assumed he was ignoring the story, since he had not made any sound.

In fact, even Medium’s eyes widened a bit.

“Whoa! You know my name, Abel?”

She referred to the emperor with the same sort of familiarity as Al did. Abel exhaled slightly at both her surprise and at how she addressed him.

“I can remember the likes of a name. Spare me the meaningless astonishment and answer my question. Where are you and Flop from? Who was the leader of the institution from your story?”

“Leader? You mean the director? I forgot their name. But me and Big Bro were in a tiny town called Eibrick.”

“Eibrick…a town in the west. I shall remember that.”

“…? Remember it and do what?”

“Deal with it as it should be dealt with. Whether it is done personally by me or not.”

Abel’s response was concise, though the meaning was lost on Medium. She had question marks floating over her head, and an even bigger cloud of questions settled in over her. But Abel, not feeling kind, intentionally chose not to answer her questions.

Not that I fully grasp everything he’s thinking, either.

“Hearing the unvarnished voices of your citizens and trying to put them to use in government policy?”

“It is nothing so admirable. As I said before, just deserts.”

A deserving reward for effort and stupidity. That was Abel’s belief as a leader, and apparently an unshakable creed.

Thinking back on it, after the Ritual of Blood in the Shudrak village, he pushed me to say my desire when I was on the verge of dying. It is the same underlying motivation.

In other words…

“You cannot allow others to go empty-handed.”

“Most are born as have-nots. Grasping something with one’s own hands, dying while clinging on to something—that is what it means to live. To earn that right and forsake it is something that should not happen.”

“An emperor talking about people being born have-nots is rather snide.”

Most people were have-nots who had no choice but to lament their lack of talent or strength and struggle as best they could. Even knowing that was just life, it was awkward hearing that from someone born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

But, while Subaru interpreted the comment as sarcasm, Abel did not meet his gaze.

“—I am no exception.”

“—? What is that?”

“Status comes with an appropriate responsibility. A fool who bears a load he cannot handle will simply be broken by it. Pride, elegance, and refinement must be cultivated and polished day in and day out.”

Abel’s gaze slowly turned to Subaru. Looking closer at Subaru’s black hair and clothes—

“A false and constructed self-perception will eventually reveal one’s true character. You seem quite familiar with presenting a projection of yourself, but it must take quite the effort to mend and repair once it is peeled away.”

“_____”

“So long as someone gets results, I will not speak about their proclivities. I have no intention of going back on that statement, but it is painful to watch one using pretense as a crutch. Someday, the foundation will collapse.”

A hot wind was blowing, but Abel’s eyes pierced him like a chill night breeze. There was no concern for others’ feelings in his word choices, and he made no effort to seek to be understood. As such, not even half of what he really meant made it through to Subaru. He just felt a lingering pain, as if his heart had been picked apart.

“…I have spoken too much. I will leave the rest to you.”

Standing up, Abel disappeared into the carriage.

There was a sound as the heavy door closed, and Subaru and Medium were left sitting around the fire with Louis, who had been sitting there vacantly, not following the conversation at all.

“…What is with that man?”

Subaru grimaced, holding a hand to his mouth.

I’m practically like a villainess over here.

It was an unbefitting appearance for Natsumi Schwartz, Subaru’s ideal iron-willed militant woman.

“Natsumi, are you all right?”

Medium gently patted Subaru’s head as he recovered from the shock.

She skillfully managed to shift over to him without standing up or uncrossing her legs. It was incredibly reassuring, like a boundless compassion that gently embraced his heart.

“Yes, I am fine. Sheesh, he is truly suggestive… Medium, do you understand what he wanted to say?”

“Mmm, not at all! But I could tell you looked hurt, and this is about all I can do.”

“That’s…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I get it! My job is to use my big body to do my best and leave the hard thinking to Big Bro and everyone else.”

Smiling brightly, she kept patting Subaru’s head. There was no trace of any guile in her face. The way she recognized her own weaknesses but did not let them bother her was so positive, and something that she shared with all of the people Subaru looked up to.

“You are so mature, Medium.”

“That’s the first time anyone’s said that! ‘A great big sister,’ sure, or ‘It’s nice how much you eat.’”

“Those are also some of the many wonderful things about you.”

“Heh-heh-heh.”

It bothered Subaru that he’d never compliment her enough, no matter how much he said, but she gratefully accepted them anyway.

Curling up in her lap, Louis seemed to be having fun basking in her dazzling cheer.

It was so tranquil that for just a moment, a brief instant, it almost felt like all the anguish and anxiety he felt fell away.

4

They enjoyed a peaceful moment, staring into the flickering

fire.

“_____”

The world was quiet, save for the crackle of the flames.

Subaru used to hate these sorts of nights when he had nothing to distract himself. He tended to pass the time mindlessly, falling into the grips of a formless unease that seemed to surround him.

As if the world was taunting him, asking if he really believed he was allowed to have a simple moment without having to think.

Some dark shadow always wound its way around his shoulders, whispering, taunting, laughing in his ears.

Even closing his eyes and plugging his ears, he could not escape that nightmarish guilt. He had tried all sorts of things to get away from it. The various hobbies and handy tricks he was complimented for were all excuses to escape the hell that was himself. The superficial shell created by the sum of all those excuses was Subaru Natsuki…

“A small relief that I amounted to something more than just a pile of sorry excuses.”

“I see…”

Talitta nodded, looking down as she listened to Subaru’s story.

Across the flames, Talitta’s face glowed red in the light as she knelt on the ground. The flickering firelight danced beautifully across her dark skin.

And speaking of beautiful, the outfit she was wearing to hide her Shudrak identity suited her well. When wearing an outfit that would pass as more “civilized,” and without the white patterns that the Shudrak traced on their bodies, she had the makings of a tall and handsome figure when wearing an outfit usually worn by men.

Though, since she was on watch that night, she had removed the jacket and rolled up her sleeves, giving her outfit a bit of a wilder feel.

“_____”

Talitta sank into thought in the brief silence.

She had pestered Subaru to learn more about him—though he had shaded out the dark and heavier parts and things from his original world—but what sort of effect would it have on her?

It had started with Subaru carefully doing his nails, and Talitta asking where he had learned to do makeup. But there had not been some grand reason why he had learned about makeup or cross-dressing. Subaru had been through a rough period in middle school, and wanting to have a brighter and more splendid time in high school, he had picked this up along the way as a challenge.

“I simply have a tendency to get engrossed in things… If I do something, I want to be sure I won’t feel embarrassed by the results.”

It was the same on every path. When it came to sharpening his skills, he stood on the shoulders of all those who had honed their craft before him.

And, as a result of seeking to produce something that was not embarrassing, Subaru’s high school life had ended. After that, he thought he would never cross-dress again, but there was no telling what might come in handy later in life.

“…I’m jealous of your attitude.”

“Ehhh?!”

“Wh-why are you so surprised…?!”

“Ah, no, that is just…not something that has been said many times about me…”

He could feel his heart leap in genuine shock beneath his false breasts.

To be honest, Subaru did not really think he was someone worthy of jealousy. He had achieved plenty of things through hard work and grit, but he still felt painfully lacking personally.

“…From long ago, I was raised hiding behind my sister. She was exactly the person you know, and no one doubted

she would someday be chief. I did not, either."

"Talitta…"

Talitta haltingly began to speak of herself. At first, he had intended to stop her, if she was saying something she did not want to just because she felt she had to share after his confession. He had only brought up the past because he had trouble smoothly directing the flow of conversation. However, listening to her as she averted her eyes, he changed his mind. He could sense that she was sharing because she wanted to talk.

"She is three years older than me. But those three years are not why she feels so much bigger. It's just…there."

"_____"

"Things she could do at ten, I couldn't do at the same age. It wasn't our age difference; it was something else that was different. I don't know what that something else is."

Pretty much everything she was saying struck cleanly home in his heart. It was the sort of story he had heard before, and also a story that he had never shared.

A sense of inferiority toward a superior older sister was what Rem had felt. And a sense of inferiority when looking at the back of someone he looked up to was a feeling that had racked Subaru.

"You really are his son."

The disappointment in oneself, the guilt at the expectations of someone precious. Talitta was almost overwhelmed by it, but she had joined this journey, following Abel, whose fight the Shudrak chief Mizelda had sworn to aid. To Talitta, it was a journey to reevaluate and come to terms with herself, and at the same time, it might have also been a chance to escape the heavy burden of expectation that was placed on her shoulders.

"I must reach an answer in the course of this trip. No, I must find my resolve."

"Resolve…is that…resolve to take up the title of chief?"

"_____"

Talitta nodded.

It was more than just finding an answer; she needed to find the resolve within herself to face this fate—the role she had been entrusted with, the role of chief to succeed Mizelda.

Talitta did not think she could avoid taking the title. Did not believe she had the right to decline. Chosen by her great sister, it was her duty to lead her people—

“If you run from it…”

“Hmm?”

“If you run from it, I would not blame you.”

Talitta’s wide-eyed expression spoke volumes about how unexpected those words were.

Though it was in the moment, Talitta had opened herself up to Subaru. He could see the situation she had been placed in, the anxiety she felt, and the duty that had been set on her slender shoulders. And also, as dutiful and self-critical as she was, how earnestly she was trying to bear it all.

Talitta may have wanted Subaru to backstop her wavering resolve and tell her to get a grip on herself. Maybe she thought Subaru, who could even cross-dress without embarrassment, would advise her that a lack of self-confidence was just a matter of one’s frame of mind.

If so, then Subaru’s words were a betrayal of her expectations.

“If you think you cannot shoulder the burden or that someone other than you is better suited to it, then we will not blame you, even if you took your stuff and left the carriage tomorrow.”

“B-but if I were to leave, then—”

“Of course, that is a concern. However, we would find a way to manage.”

In his mind, Subaru scoffed at himself.

That’s a convenient thing to say. Just how much scorn would Abel heap on me if he heard this? We’re badly

lacking in capable fighters as it is, and I'm saying it would be fine to let Talitta go? Now, when we can't afford to lose anyone?

"Do you mean I am not nee—?"

"No, that would be a terrible misunderstanding. Both personally and in a fight, I wish to have you around. However, that is just my selfish desire."

"Selfish……?"

"It would be like asking you to stifle your own feelings so that I could live."

As he was the same sort of person and had experienced it before, it was not something he could force on Talitta. She was older and might have spent longer thinking about these sorts of worries than Subaru had, but having gotten the opportunity to escape the darkness that lay down that path, Subaru spoke like an experienced elder.

You can't be anyone else.

No matter how much you looked up to them, how jealous you were of them, no matter how much you desperately longed for them.

"We cannot be anything other than ourselves."

And also, at least become a self that you can like, a self you can accept, a self that you can feel confident in being.

Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, a synthesis of disappointments and failures and just a little bit of growth.

"…Well, this is a little annoying."

It was a soft murmur, quiet enough that Talitta could not hear it.

He was basically just spinning the theory he had heard from Abel a few hours earlier while sitting at this same fire. The many have-nots grabbing hold of something and living their hardest.

The nature of that subject seemed to overlap with what Subaru wanted to say.

"_____"

Hearing that, Talitta's eyes wavered, and her hesitation deepened. Where that hesitation led would be up to Talitta to decide, but he believed that whatever her choice, it deserved to be respected.

Subaru had run away from the expectations placed on him and the guilt of failing to live up to them. In fact, he suspected the whole reason he had been summoned to this new world was because of some meddlesome being who had sensed that desire to escape. If he had not been able to say good-bye to his parents—his real parents, not an illusion—because of that, then it would be too much to bear, though…

"Running away can also bring salvation."

At the very least, he could not have reached the current Subaru Natsuki's mindset if he had stayed in his room, trapped between expectations and guilt. He would have just stayed the Subaru who could barely handle himself, let alone wanting or even trying to do something for anyone else. It was not a bad thing to retreat until the preparations for battle had been completed. And it should even be possible to build a world where the choice not to fight was available, too.

"Confidence and resolve…"

"Huh?"

"I am lacking confidence and resolve. However, it is not just that……"

Talitta's lips trembled as she murmured. It was faint, almost too soft to be heard over the crackle of the wood, and there was a keen emotion to it, maybe even more so than when she had spoken about her own position earlier.

Struggling under the weight that she could not shoulder, Talitta continued weakly—

"If I made a terrible mistake…what could I do? How could I atone for it?"

"Mistakes and atonement…you?"

"Ah." Talitta groaned.

He could see regret in her eyes, regret at the almost penitent question she had mentioned to Subaru, just like the regret she had mentioned moments ago.

A dark, shadowy regret hanging over Talitta's future, something different from a sense of inferiority toward her older sister.

"It was an odd question… Please forget it."

Her final words were a decision not to continue sharing a story that she could not fully tell. It was clear at a glance from her expression that she had not reached an answer. However, Subaru could not force her to say any more now.

I just have to be around if the time ever comes when she decides she wants to let it out……

"It's about time to change shifts, Bro."

A voice called out from the carriage as he reached that conclusion.

Al stretched his thick neck and slowly walked toward the fire. They had decided on three-hour shifts for night watch, and Subaru's watch had ended.

"I am unhappy about Abel and Louis not being in the rotation, though…"

"Give it a break, Bro. You wanna be executed once he's back warming his throne just 'cause you made him stand watch at night?"

"If payback for pent-up resentment from the road is on the table, then I won't have enough heads to lose."

"If you know that, then hold it in some. It puts me on edge just being around when you do it."

Al's response was a reasonable one, but Subaru had no intention of backing down from his stance of criticizing Abel's attitude. *The reason he's such a haughty tyrant is because no one ever goes at it with him. It would be good to reform his character some while he's a refugee without any real authority.*

"Without that, even if our efforts are rewarded, there will be another revolution again, and next time they might

wheel out the guillotines.”

“Ah, well, I’ll leave that to you, then. As you can guess from the princess, I tend to go with a laissez-faire, let-things-fall-where-they-may stance.”

Waving his hand flippantly, Al gave up trying to convince Subaru to change his ways. Sighing at that unreliable attitude, Subaru looked back at Talitta. She was staring into the fire, deep in thought.

“Talitta, I am leaving now. If you can’t bear any more of Al’s harassment or stupid jokes, please let me know at once.”

“Huh…?”

“I’m not like the princess! I have a proper sense of distance and intimacy. Gotta have the right time and place for stuff.”

“That’s something I struggle with.”

He gestured discreetly for Al as he made that shameful confession.

“Talitta might start a life-counseling discussion of her own accord. If she does, please give her good guidance, as a senpai with significant life experience.”

“That sounds a lot like the exact opposite of any description of me. I don’t take any responsibility for anyone else’s life, so I’ve pretty aggressively dodged those sorts of things.”

“This is a chance to overcome some weaknesses. Like not being able to eat green beppers.”

Emilia and Beatrice both did not like beppers, but they were doing their best to overcome it, boldly holding on to the spirit of a challenger and trying various preparations of this world’s version of a bell pepper.

At the moment, neither of them had managed to succeed once, but Subaru believed that so long as they kept fighting, there would come a day when they would stand victorious.

“So you do your best, too, Al.”

“Am I the only one here who thinks comparing this to overcoming a dislike of veggies rings a bit hollow?”

At the very least, it had touched on all the right places to light a fire in Subaru, so his conclusion was just that the problem lay with Al.

“See you tomorrow, Natsumi…”

“…Yes, see you tomorrow.”

Yielding his seat in front of the fire to Al, Subaru started to head toward the carriage when Talitta spoke up. It was weak, but it was a promise for tomorrow, nonetheless. Accepting her words, Subaru felt some hope at the thought of seeing her again.

There was nothing wrong with running away. That took a different kind of strength. But there were also people who found a purpose in choosing to stand and fight. Subaru thought it would be nice if that were the case for Talitta.

“Everyone has their own thoughts… Of course they do.”

The chat with Medium after dinner and the deep discussion just now with Talitta had made him realize that there was so much to learn about them, and he was sure that it would have an impact on the trip.

It could be called a result of their opening up and coming together, at least a bit. As companions traveling the same road, deepening their bonds was more than worthwhile.

So…

“What do you say? Why don’t you open up a little with us, too?”

Subaru addressed the figure in the front seat of the darkened carriage.

The sleeping area was divided by a simple curtain hanging down the middle, with the men near the entrance and the women farther back, and with neither Subaru nor Al sleeping, there was only one suspect who could be in the front seat.

It was a person with a single black eye glimmering

slightly in the dark.

“We are going out of our way to keep watch, so I would hope you at least take proper advantage of that favor.”

“…It is the custom of the Volakian imperial family to sleep with one eye open.”

There was a killer in an old movie who talked about making a habit of sleeping with one eye open, and here was Abel, blending perfectly into the dark night, saying the same thing.

I’ve heard before that that is something hard to do, with how human brains are structured, but seeing Abel actually doing it…I guess it is possible.

But at the moment, exasperation outweighed the admiration.

“Do you think we will take your head in your sleep?”

“_____”

“We took part in the siege of a fortress and are accompanying you to the Demon City to convince a Divine General to join your cause. Do you still suspect there might be a chance we would harm you?”

Subaru was speaking slowly and admonishingly, but Abel’s penetrating expression was unwavering. He continued to alternate, blinking his right and left eyes in succession, as was his habit. The number of blinks was kept to a minimal level, too, probably for the same reason that he could not just sleep with both eyes closed.

“Do not indulge in the vain belief that you may change the way I am. Know your place.”

“_____”

“The Demon City is near. Fulfill your own role. I do not ask more and will not forgive less.”

Saying that, Abel intentionally closed one eye, erecting a barrier between them. Subaru felt a bitterness at that unapproachability, shaking his head.

“In that case, I…I will treat you to some heavy snoring.”

The shell of Natsumi Schwartz cracked and fell away,

revealing the true nature of Subaru Natsuki underneath.

Not waiting for a response, Subaru set his sights on the farthest possible seat, took off his wig, loosened his clothes, and lay down.

Subaru considered trying to wake Abel up in an act of defiance, but he did not know the point or even how to do it, so at some point, his tired body slipped into unconsciousness.

The party's journey continued with a variety of troubles, anxieties, and changes in their relationships brewing.

Their arrival in Chaosflame was drawing near.

5

"*Aaa! Uuu!*"

Louis was bouncing on the driver's bench, pointing at the cityscape visible up ahead.

Subaru would have liked to warn her not to get in the way of driving the gale steed, but Medium was holding the reins, and she just hugged Louis's shoulder and enthusiastically agreed, making it tactless to admonish her.

Not to mention, Subaru was overwhelmed by the very same sight, too.

"So that's the Demon City, Chaosflame…"

Gulping, Subaru shuddered in surprise.

The Water Gate City of Pristella in Lugunica had been an overwhelming sight that had stolen his breath away, and here in the empire, he had been impressed by a cityscape so different from what he had seen in Lugunica. But the impact of the Demon City was something else entirely for Subaru.

To the best of his understanding, a city was an aggregation of buildings for countless people to live in, so it followed a common set of rules and regulations that combined to form a distinct personality. However,

Chaosflame did not evoke any such unifying feel. It was befitting of a city named “Chaos,” a melting pot of all sorts of different ideas and beliefs. In the center of the city stood a castle, making its presence felt using a mixture of high-contrast reds and blues, and the city had been built up around it in a circle. At a glance, it looked similar in construction to Lugunica’s capital, where there was a regulation to its structure, dividing out slums and nobility into various distinct sections of the city.

But Chaosflame was different. There was a decrepit and abandoned building next to a glittering new construction, a neighborhood of small buildings and suddenly a tower more than twice as tall as any other on the street, a rough, sandy area right next to a vibrant green park.

There were countless beams and footholds freely strung together between the tops of buildings, making the entire city seem like a spider’s web in the distance. In scale and order, it was not remotely reasonable. *I can see how it got the name “Demon City.”*

The entire city was unified in that one thing. It was, without a doubt, a place where chaos reigned.

“…It looks like a thing that could be knocked down by a single push from a giant.”

Al made that comment as he looked at the messy city coming into view. He sat beside Subaru with his hand on his helmet, shading his eyes as he looked out at the city.

Not that it matters, but is there even a point in doing that when you’re wearing a helmet?

“Huh? What is it, Bro? Something up?”

“No, nothing big… What’s that about a giant’s push, though?”

“Huh? They didn’t say that where you were from? It means an earthquake or things like that.”

Al cocked his head as he answered the question.

Though Al was from the same home, in this case, “same home” meant their original world. They were not actually

from the same locations in the true meaning of the word. Subaru knew a fair number of aphorisms involving onis, but not really many involving giants.

“Maybe it has something to do with the baseball team? I don’t really know much about that.”

“Ah, no, I don’t think so. Not like I go out of my way to remember where I picked up a saying, but I don’t remember being a particularly big fan of baseball.”

“Really? I feel like I could see you kicking back and enjoying a beer while watching a game.”

“I wasn’t really that much of a drinker in the first place.” Al chuckled wryly.

Remembering how old he would have been when he came to this world, Subaru could understand that.

Either way, while they were chatting, the party’s carriage made its way to the great gate that watched over the chaotic city.

Making it through this is the final hurdle of the journey and the critical turning point.

With that thought, Subaru set about reconstructing Natsumi Schwartz with renewed vigor.

“Enter.”

“Got it! Thank you.”

“*Uuu!*”

The big man collected their toll, glanced around inside the carriage, and then gave them permission to pass. He was a member of the cyclops tribe—people with a single big eye in the middle of their face—who had the role of city guards in this city.

Subaru was a little thrown off by getting permission to enter with just a cursory glance. *Or does that one eye have some sort of special vision or something?*

“Perhaps that is why they are specifically chosen to watch the gate.”

“You seem to be overthinking things, but the cyclops tribe has no such power. From what I have heard, they can see a little farther than those with two eyes, but largely, there is no difference in their eyes.”

“Of course! Since they let such a suspicious-looking carriage pass freely.”

Subaru howled as he put a hand to his chin, grasping for some sort of explanation he could accept. Abel snorted, wearing a red oni mask over his face. Abel had put the mask on when they reached the city, and Subaru’s strongest efforts to plead with him to remove it had had no effect. The infuriating thing was that, just as Abel had anticipated, the guard simply ignored the man in the suspicious oni mask as if it were normal.

“How alarming. If the city’s first line of defense is like that…how is the order kept?”

“I have to agree with Natsumi. Despite the fact that we are wearing clothes with sleeves, he made no comment at all.”

“Mmm…it sounds like your surprise is of a slightly different nature than mine…”

Talitta’s expression was tense as she agreed, but unfortunately, the culture shock she apparently felt was different from the one Subaru experienced.

For him, it was more the city’s general attitude; for her, it was her self-consciousness as a Shudrak.

“Ahem. Regardless, we have managed to gain entry to the city, but…”

Having passed the half-hearted inspection, they were promptly swallowed up by the lawless and messy city. Medium and Louis were cheering excitedly at each and every new sight. Subaru did not know what it looked like from the outside, but from inside the carriage, the city was an eye-popping sight.

The first thing that stood out upon entering the city was the many different races of people he had never seen

before. The cyclops at the gate had left a strong impression, but once they were in the city, Subaru realized that he was not particularly eye-catching at all.

In terms of major groups, there were beast people of all types—not just cat and dog people, but also races of distinctly smaller and larger sizes, like rabbit people and lion people, all walking on the streets. A group of reptilian lizard people were setting up a shop for the day. Then there was the many-armed tribe with all their various numbers of arms, as well as a group with distinctively long hair that seemed to be some sort of fashion trait distinguishing them? *I can't really say.*

There was even what looked like a stone walking along, and a chimera-looking person who had parts of various races fused in their body.

"_____"

Seeing so many races blending without seemingly any thought about it was a pretty big shock for Subaru. Of course, Lugunica's capital had been an impactful enough scene to catch his attention right after he had been summoned to this world, but later on, as he learned more about life in this world, he started to learn a bit more about the complicated situation for demi-humans.

Emilia being ostracized for being a half-elf was the prime example, but the situation for demi-humans in this world was not exactly great. Races with particularly distinctive appearances apparently even sometimes chose to live their lives away from human settlements in order to avoid trouble.

Garfiel's home in the Sanctuary existed because of that sort of prejudice.

But what about here?

People of all different races were mingling and standing together, seemingly living without fear, but what most surprised Subaru was their backs. They were standing tall, proud of their roots, and showing them for all to see. The

beast people did not file their claws or fangs, the lizard people did not polish their scales, and people of forms and shapes that would be considered strange or grotesque in Lugunica did not cover their faces or limbs with extra cloth. It was a fresh and striking sight.

“You asked how the order is kept here.”

Turning, he saw Abel in his mask. While Medium and Louis out front, and even Subaru, Al, and Talitta inside were looking around in interest at their surroundings, the emperor hiding his face hooked Subaru’s attention and continued.

“As you can see, there is no order here. If you ask what law there is, then it is a formless law. It can be called a city of vice that scorns the very concept of order.”

“Vice…that is quite a downer when people are doing their best to appreciate the sights and sounds of this place.”

“Appreciate? You are moved by it? I suppose for an outsider such as yourself, that might be natural.”

Abel shrugged his slender shoulders.

It felt a little like being treated as an outsider, the way he said that, which reminded Subaru of the argument in the carriage a few days ago. If Subaru was the only one who had felt anything, though, then Abel would probably snort at the idea of calling it an argument.

“But isn’t the whole concept of this place’s disorder coming together and forming a semblance of order? What do you say, Abel?”

“If you judge it by the true nature of order, then this city is undoubtedly chaotic. What exactly do you think the nature of order is?”

“I feel like I just got asked a Zen proverb… I’m tagging you in, Bro!”

Subaru closed one eye as Al quickly abandoned trying to think.

But, unlike Al, who had no sense of pride, Subaru didn’t

like to wave the white flag so easily. All the more so if he was dealing with Abel, so he kneaded as much logic as he could manage to pull together and…

“The true nature of order is, you know…everyone getting along! Peace!”

“The true nature of order is conformity.”

Abel elaborated without reacting to Subaru’s kindergarten-level opinion. Subaru furrowed his brow at that answer as Abel continued.

“The many sharing the same values. It could be a religion or a creed, goals, self-interest. On a group level, order is what we call sharing unvarying uniformity. The flights of fancy you mentioned are all built atop the foundation of that order.”

“Flights of fancy…? Is peace really such a crazy thing?”

“Conflict is an inescapable part of nature. Its nature is unchanged whether the weapons for the conflict are words and politics rather than swords and spears. But order is an excellent contrivance for shaping an environment and guarding it against collapse. Observe.”

Gesturing to the window with his jaw, he drew their attention outside.

What he gestured to while sitting there, not even looking at the window because it was something he could be confident was there regardless, was the castle that was the symbol of the Demon City.

“As the jester correctly observed, this city produces order from disorder. And even as the city becomes a melting pot of many races, it is physical proof that the city has not fallen.”

“That castle… No, inside it…”

“Yoruna Mishigure.”

Subaru shuddered as Abel’s voice rang in his ears.

The voice was stiff. Subaru could not see with the mask covering his face, but he could not help wondering what Abel thought of the Divine General who was both such a

problem and a key piece in his fight to reclaim the throne.

The Demon City, spreading chaotically in all directions, people with no uniformity walking all over. And the tall castle standing right in the center of it all, almost looking down at the emperor and his party jumping in headfirst. To Subaru, it seemed like the towering building enjoyed toying with their fates.

6

Subaru knew little about Yoruna Mishigure, one of the Nine Divine Generals.

She was the leader of Chaosflame and a general first-class with the rank of Seven. However, she was dangerous, and despite being counted as one of the swords of the emperor, she had rebelled against him many times.

She had avoided execution and banishment by the emperor's mercy and yet remained unflinchingly rebellious, like a flower of calamity.

That was what Subaru had been told by Zikr, since the emperor did not know how to share information or handle communications with his direct reports. Yoruna and Cecils were the only two people whose humanity even Zikr had struggled to express.

"Does that mean this woman is the craziest woman in Volakia…?"

With that concerning thought, and wondering what was in store for them, Subaru felt his false chest grow heavy.

They were currently here to negotiate with the woman, but someday they would also have to come face-to-face with the craziest man in Volakia. All with the added danger of being wiped out if they failed to convince them to join up as allies.

But putting Cecils aside for the moment…

"My impression of this Yoruna woman has changed after

seeing this city.”

The reason for the change was the Demon City itself and the sight of all the people living here.

The explanation of order that Abel had given along the way had not been just him getting on a high horse and acting wise, but was to focus their attention on the true nature of the order in this city. Chaosflame was bursting at the seams with a disordered mess of people and objects, and the symbol of order that kept that simmering stew of chaos from collapsing—that was Yoruna Mishigure.

Her existence was what brought the only order to this lawless gathering of people. Abel did not dismiss her from her role as a Divine General because he valued her abilities.

Mostly…

“She is definitely a weird one, so you really drew the short straw on this one, Bro.”

Al laughed, slapping his knee while sitting cross-legged. Glancing at Al slovenly sitting atop the wooden floor, Subaru sighed slightly while sitting up straight in a perfect and precise pose. Al’s everlasting sense of normalcy was often a saving grace and reassurance, but it was always a case-by-case thing.

“Al, please behave with more dignity. You can never know when or from where you might be watched. Also, please stop calling me ‘Bro.’”

“Aye-aye…but what should I call you, then? ‘Bro’ but written with the character for ‘Sis’?”

“Anyone who does not understand Japanese would not appreciate the difference, would they?”

Japanese was a thing of beauty and multifaceted expression that set the heart aflutter, but at present, there was little value in adding more code words that only held meaning for Subaru and Al.

“You address Medium and Talitta and even Abel so intimately, so that would be the natural solution for me as

well, don’t you suppose?”

“In that case, maybe I say ‘Natsumi’ in a cutesy way? Ugh, that gave me goose bumps!”

“Please deal with it, then! Sheesh, you are so lackadaisical…”

Subaru took the lead, scolding Al, who had just held up his arm, showing off the goose bumps. It was a strange thing to say, but the senior member of the current lineup was of no use, so there was no choice. In terms of assignments, Subaru was in the most important position, so it was probably best for him to be on guard.

Since…

“…We are already inside the Crimson Lazuli Palace.”

Murmuring to himself, Subaru admonished himself to tighten up.

Yes, they had already entered the core of the Demon City, having been beckoned into the castle that gleamed with such a mysterious blue and red glow after requesting an audience with the city’s leader, Yoruna Mishigure.

After they’d successfully entered the city, their next movements had been quick. They found an inn where they could keep the gale steed and carriage. With their lodgings secured, they set in motion their strategy to sway Yoruna. There was no hesitation, because they had discussed what needed to be done while on the road.

The plan to make an ally of the dangerous general, Yoruna, was…

7

“Deliver this to the castle’s master, Yoruna Mishigure. There should be a response from her,” Abel said as he handed Subaru a letter that he had written.

The letter was sealed with wax and could not be opened. Sealing an envelope with wax and imprinting a family seal

or the like with a ring before the wax cooled was a common method of proving a letter's origin among nobles. However, the letter Subaru was given had no such seal.

"Unfortunately, both of the pieces I brought with me proving my identity have shattered. One by your hand, and the other in Guaral."

"Yes, the Ritual of Blood and Arakiya's revolt. But will she really read it without any proof? And supposing she did, would she believe it?"

"An unnecessary concern. I have no intention of revealing the contents, but should she read it, she will know it is me," Abel assured him.

"I see… Incidentally, would it not be more certain to approach her directly yourself?"

Slipping the letter into his breast pocket, he immediately asked the obvious question.

The reason they were going with handing over a letter was because Abel had said he would not accompany them to the castle, but his presence would be the fastest and simplest way to prove themselves.

And why did he even come if he isn't going to meet Yoruna directly?

"In that case, the panic at the inspection would not have happened, and the road would have been more tranquil, I imagine…"

"There is no bound to your disrespect."

"You are the one disrupting our harmony, after all…"

It would be more accurate to include Louis in that, but he was wanting to snark at Abel, so he set the expert at messing with his heart aside for the moment.

"It should go without saying that I will exchange words with Yoruna Mishigure directly. However, it is inconvenient to show my face immediately. You should understand," Abel answered annoyedly from behind the mask.

"Telling me to read the room… Ah, now that you mention it."

Subaru had a quiet understanding when Abel said that.

Thinking closer, this was someone who had rebelled against Abel several times already. Yoruna presumably had some issues with Abel's rule to do that, so naturally, they would get along like water and oil. It was like tossing a smoldering coal into a powder keg.

I'm amazed he even decided to bring himself all the way here.

"Hand that letter to Yoruna Mishigure. However, do not reveal that it is from me…an official letter from the emperor."

"Eh? Why? Without that, won't we be turned back at the gate?"

"In the worst case. So long as she reads the letter, nothing bad will be done to you, but I cannot predict how she might react before she is given the letter. And so you must devise a means of entering the castle."

"Devise…?"

With that unexpected challenge added, Subaru looked at Abel in shock. He was just crossing his arms, his expression hidden by the oni mask.

"The nature of her personality and the balance of her preferences may be discerned by observing the city. Put your guile to work and catch her attention."

"There is a malice underlying your phrasing!"

"I have a next-best plan, but I would prefer to avoid relying on it. It would cut off the distant future, and there is much that lies ahead, considering my goal. Understand?"

"You truly are a pompous man…"

Subaru's lips curled, revealing his displeasure.

I might just be willing to join up with Yoruna to rise against Abel, too. If anything, we might get along and become good friends.

"…All right, then I will proceed on that front."

"It appears you have lit upon something, but it does not seem to be something good."

Not that that has much impact, coming from the guy who proposed something so unreasonable.

8

Along those lines, they had managed to make their way into Yoruna Mishigure's Crimson Lazuli Palace at the heart of the Demon City.

Like Abel had requested, they had gotten in without relying on his name. There had been a few curveballs in the process, but as with the guards at the city gate, the castle guards did not show much caution, so after some talking, they had let Subaru and his party into the waiting room.

Thus, they were waiting in the large waiting room for an official to call for them.

The castle almost gave off the vibe of a Japanese castle, and there were no guards watching the room where they were waiting. Subaru felt more and more nervous about the security here, with how smoothly things had progressed.

"Of course, it is convenient, but…if a visitor could enter the castle this easily, then even for a general first-class, wouldn't there be a threat of assassination?"

"Yeah, they didn't even take our weapons from us, either. I about had a heart attack when they actually let us in without even a check."

"Well, yeah, 'cause we have no intention of causing a fuss here, after all. You're weird sometimes, Al!"

Subaru and Al were both exasperated by a handling that was less magnanimous and more careless, but Medium was sitting neatly with her legs to one side, laughing at them for overthinking things.

Subaru, Al, and Medium were the three who had been let in as messengers. Abel, Talitta, and Louis were waiting back at the lodge.

Officially, Talitta was staying behind as a guard, but

considering she had to deal with the troublesome pair of Abel and Louis, she was more like a babysitter.

“At the very least, we have to allay Talitta’s anxiety… That is why we went with this plan, after all.”

“You’re really bold, Natsumi! Me and Al were both surprised, too.”

“Yeah, Al here was real shocked.”

“Right?”

Subaru had his thoughts about Al shamelessly following along with Medium, but even so, he was actually kind of proud of his plan.

Having been given the task of delivering a letter for Abel, with the limitation that they could not use his name, Subaru had hit upon a flash of inspiration at the end of his struggles. Indeed, they had been allowed into the castle like this precisely because his idea had been so forward-looking.

“The hint for the solution is the letters *F* and *U* and the name ‘Abel.’”

“Ah-ha-ha, always lashing out at Abel. I think it’s incredible.”

“Incredible? Me? Or Abel’s nastiness?”

“Both!”

“You’re pretty bold, too, you know, Medium.”

Medium cheerfully raised her hand while commenting on Subaru’s relationship with Abel.

They could not afford to become as incompatible as oil and water as long as they had to work together. Since they both had to walk together in the same direction, they were proceeding forward, shoulders bumping into each other.

In terms of relationship, it could be compared to how Subaru and Julius had been before. But with all that had happened in the Pleiades Watchtower, Subaru trusted Julius. Though he would never tell Julius that or ever let it show.

“But it is not something simple, either.”

Put simply, the ill will had lessened, and they could be said to have opened up to each other some.

But it had been a long road to get there, and they had crossed some high peaks and low valleys along the way. It was not a simple thing to forge better relations between people. At the very least, the road would never be smooth and flat unless everyone involved agreed to try to improve things. Even if one side tried, it would stay difficult as long as the other continued to make a mess of things.

“I apologize for the wait. This way, please.”

That bitter feeling was interrupted by the guide who appeared at the room’s entrance.

She was a young deer-girl with large antlers growing from her head. A half-beast person who mostly appeared human, other than the antlers on her head. She looked to be in her early to mid-teens and was wearing a kimono that was not too gaudy.

The girl quietly guiding them was evoking something familiar to Subaru, but he was unable to put his finger on what as she led the three of them to the upper floor of the castle.

“It’s almost like Tsutenkaku…”

Subaru murmured in awe, looking at the space they were led to for the meeting. It was a wide space, with the floors and rooms opened to the outside, again reminiscent of the older-style Japanese castles that Subaru knew.

There’s even a tower. I’m impressed.

“Please wait here. Lady Yoruna will be with you soon.”

“Yes, thank you kindly… Oh?”

Thanking the girl who had guided them, Subaru returned to his senses and cocked his head. The reason was the presence of visitors who were already in the reception room of the tower. It was clear from the fact that the seat at the very back of the room was empty that none of them were Yoruna.

“Those are…?”

“They are people seeking an audience with Lady Yoruna, just as you are. Lady Yoruna is a capricious lady and so will see all of you at once.”

“Ehh…?”

Subaru groaned softly at the girl’s calm response.

It was an outrageous idea, illogical in the extreme. At best, Yoruna was making those visiting her uncomfortable, and they might well want to ask her something that they did not want others to hear.

“Pretty much right where we fall, Natsumi.”

“…Hearing you call me that gives me goose bumps.”

Subaru focused on the letter in his pocket.

The contents of the letter were unknown, but it should contain something seeking the support of Yoruna in his goal of taking back his seat on the throne. According to him, if she just read the letter, nothing bad would happen to them, but…

“What should we do?” Medium cocked her head.

The girl who had guided them stepped away, leaving the three of them alone.

Even in such an anomalous situation, Medium was as bold and open as ever. She was cheerful and free-spirited but also reasonable. Probably because the division of responsibilities she had with Flop was so clear-cut.

Subaru rubbed his eyes and stepped into the room.

“Let’s try to ask to be alone before giving her the letter. She might reject it, but given the situation, there is no harm in asking.”

“If it was the princess, she might just have your head for bothering her, you know?”

“Please don’t bring up examples like that right now…”

Extreme examples like that just raised his wariness of Yoruna, who was surely just as extreme a person to deal with.

Anxious about his companion’s betrayal, Subaru looked around the room with a faintly nervous expression.

Other than the absence of tatami flooring, it looked just like the sort of formal space where military councils or ministerial discussions with the castle's lord might be held in a Japanese period piece.

The messengers being made to wait in the lower space for the castle's lord to appear in the upper space was the same, too.

"Let us stay in this area."

Subaru moved forward into the room before sitting down in a position a little removed to the side of the guests who had arrived first.

Oddly enough, in all the period pieces, when counselors and ministers met the lord, they always seemed to line up like this, as if everyone was worried about the others getting ahead.

I don't know if this is normal for a messenger, though.

"_____"

Sitting there patiently, Subaru glanced over at the others waiting in the room. There were four of them, and they had their gear about them, just like Subaru's party. One was sitting in front of the other three, probably serving as their representative. The other three seemed to be his bodyguards, from the look of it.

"…Feels like they have something to talk about they would rather not have heard, too."

It was making it harder and harder to accept whatever logic Yoruna had in lumping her guests together like this.

Though he felt it rude, Subaru turned his attention to the figure out in front, the representative being protected by the other three.

What sort of thing did they come to Yoruna for……?

"*Ngh!*"

The next moment, Subaru caught his breath in shock, his cheeks and neck completely spasming. With an awkward noise, he immediately looked down. Hearing that, the person glanced over; however, seeing Subaru looking

down, his body facing the upper seat in front of him, he looked away, revealing no particular interest.

Sensing that, Subaru exhaled, calming himself as his heart threatened to explode in his chest. Seeing Subaru's condition, Al and Medium seemed to find it strange, but in time, they would surely experience the same shock Subaru had.

Since…

"…This is no joke."

Subaru's unpleasant mutter was about the man waiting for Yoruna Mishigure just five yards to the side.

It was a man with the exact same face as Abel had, who should not have been there.

CHAPTER 5

A REWARD EIGHT YEARS IN THE MAKING

1

—The Crimson Lazuli Palace, rising from the center of Chaosflame.

A city that could not be understood without a certain aesthetic sense, its cityscape was a wedding cake of chaos slathered over disorder, with no unifying concept—the materials and styles were all different, with boards and paths connecting wildly different roofs. And at the center stood the prominent mix of glittering red and blue that composed the castle.

In the first place, lapis lazuli was supposed to be a blue color, so it was already contradictory to call it crimson, but just looking at the appearance of the Crimson Lazuli Palace, anyone would agree the name was accurate.

A stone that was a blue like lapis lazuli was used heavily for the foundation and main supports of the place. It was a lustrous, deep-blue gemstone, with a swirling red embedded in it like drips of blood in a pool of water. At times, it seemed to have a bloody red hue, even though the lapis lazuli should have been blue.

It was a chaotic castle gleaming with mercurial energy, never remaining a single solid color.

Because it was the castle of Yoruna Mishigure, leader of the Demon City.

Inside the tower of the palace…

“_____”

Subaru froze, the awaited meeting with Yoruna right before him.

An unpleasant cold sweat formed on his back when he saw the representative of the other group awaiting Yoruna’s arrival. It was a familiar black-haired demonic figure calmly waiting, attended by guards behind him. However, there was no way Subaru would encounter him here, especially not with his face bare rather than covered by a mask.

Meaning, the man just standing there like it was nothing was…

“Huh, Abel? Why are…? *Mgh*.”

“Whoops, are you all right, Medium? If you’re looking for Al, I’m right here.”

Subaru froze in shock as a dangerous scene opened and closed suddenly behind him. Seeing a familiar face in the other group, Medium had started to call out to him, when Al quickly covered her mouth. Of course, that had drawn a suspicious look from the other group, but Subaru deflected it with an ingratiating smile. And…

“Good cover, Al.”

“Yeah, that was a pretty godly reaction, if I do say so myself, so feel free to compliment me some more… But isn’t this a little too big a surprise?”

“…Yes, I am in complete agreement.”

Subaru nodded gravely.

Butting heads with an unexpected opponent—and this was the worst possible one he could imagine running into.

The person tasked with serving as Abel’s body double, capable of taking the same form as him. If what Subaru had heard in advance was correct, then the false emperor standing there was also a Divine General.

“Turns out it was best Abel wasn’t here.”

“Yeah, that was damn close to turning into a duel to

decide who was the true emperor.”

“Maybe that can still be an option, too, but…”

Glancing at the guards protecting the man with Abel’s face, Subaru was tempted by the thought. It was unclear how many soldiers were lurking in the Demon City, but at the very least, the fake had three people in his entourage here—for someone protected by an army numbering in the tens of thousands, it might just be the perfect opportunity to peel back the mask.

“Wanna give it a shot and see?”

“…No, that is too hasty, I am sure. If there were an easy checkpoint to continue from, then it might be an option, but the chance of something irreversible happening is too frightening. Let’s be careful not to get ahead of ourselves.”

“Aye-aye.”

It was hard to tell how serious Al was, but he did not seem torn up about his suggestion being rejected.

There was a tendency for Subaru to reject his ideas, but that was because Al would come to the same sorts of ideas Subaru would think of first and share them with the world, giving Subaru time to calmly judge them. Thanks to that, Subaru was getting less derailed down side paths and could spend more time carefully investigating more reasonable choices.

At the very least, they should search for a way to get through this moment without provoking the ire of the fake emperor and his attendants. And if possible, find out the reason they had come, too.

Why are they here in Chaosflame now?

It was strange for the emperor to come in person so far from the capital, even if he was actually a fake.

“Hey, hey. Ummm.”

Medium suddenly interrupted Subaru’s and Al’s thoughts. She’d had her mouth covered and was forced to listen to their whispers without any explanation, so she lowered her voice to a whisper to match while staring with

big round eyes at the false emperor.

“I don’t really get it yet, but…that Abel’s a different person than the Abel we know?”

“Yeah, that’s right. No doubt. Since the real one is at an inn downtown, arrogantly waiting for us to come back. That’s why we’re so puzzled…”

“Then isn’t that pretty bad? Since your…?”

“Me? What about……? Ah.”

Medium was saying she did not understand, but she had a better grasp of the true nature of the problem than either of them. Subaru furrowed his brow at that comment before quickly realizing what she was concerned about.

It was something Subaru or Al should have realized as soon as they had noticed the fake emperor. They should not have needed Medium to point out such a huge problem.

“Welcome, Lady Yoruna Mishigure.”

But cruelly, the deer-girl who had shown them in returned, promptly ending their discussion about what to do. She bowed deeply to Subaru’s group and the fake emperor’s party, then opened the door at the front of the large space.

“If it please you,” she said.

Slowly, a figure set foot into the room. Seeing her, Subaru finally realized what the little deer-girl reminded him of. She looked and sounded just like a *kamuro*. In an older era, a *kamuro* was a girl who worked as a courtesan-in-training in Japanese red-light districts, attending to a higher-ranking courtesan while learning proper manners and the arts.

Her surprisingly stylish kimono and hair decorations had evoked that image, but more than anything, it was the figure she ushered into the room.

“_____”

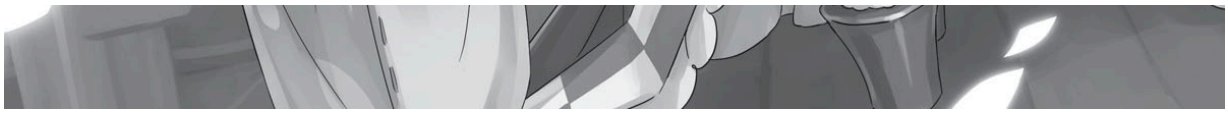
The reason Subaru had come up with the word *kamuro* was because *she* had just made an entrance. Forgetting to breathe, eyes opening wide and staring—they were

instinctive responses when someone observed something so beautiful, so overwhelming that it dominated and consumed their minds.

“There are quite a number of visitors today.”

The tall woman’s blue, almond-shaped eyes narrowed.

She was slender and tall, wearing a bright and flowery kimono, her beautifully and neatly arranged hair shading from white at the roots to a vibrant orange at the tips.



Her hair was adorned with an ornamental hairpin made from carefully worked animal bone or horn and also with several other ornaments made using fangs and scales, creating an eye-pleasing spectacle that was a joy to behold. However, they were all accessories, nothing more than artificial beauty fashioned by someone's hand.

To bring out their beauty and charm, the quality of the person wearing the finery was crucial. And in that regard, the figure in the kimono was, of course…

"_____"

The captivating beauty moved her lithe body with grace, proceeding with an unhurried gait.

With refined gestures, while evoking a bored and almost listless mood, she moved with a purpose perfectly calculated to draw the eye of the onlooker, her graceful, mincing footsteps further highlighted by the fox tails that appeared far too large for her slender body.

Nine tails, bushy and covered in luxurious fur.

Sticking perkily out from her carefully bound hair, pins, and adornments were fox ears, as if intoxicating those watching her with the inescapable truth that this was a beautiful, kimono-clad fox woman.

"You have come a long way to pay a visit to my castle."

And having said that, she sat in the seat prepared at the top of the room, leaning her weight onto the armrest casually. She extended her hand, and her attendant immediately placed an elegant, metal-tipped pipe into it. A flame was lit at the end of the pipe, and then she inhaled the swirling purple smoke and smiled bewitchingly.

Taking her seat at the top of the room, she looked down at her guests, including the emperor of Volakia.

"_____"

Her ornate figure, the words she spoke, and the way she wore her kimono—intentionally baring her slender shoulders—together with the image of the *kamuro* attending her, all brought the word *oiran* to Subaru's mind.

Of course, Subaru had never actually seen a real red-light district or courtesan. It was all just knowledge he had picked up from imbibing period pieces set in older times, but even so, he could not imagine anything else.

No, it's too much to say there are no words to describe her.

There absolutely were words that were perfectly apt in this situation. It was true that she was stunning and evoked an image of an oiran, but before that, she was one of the Nine Divine Generals and held the title of Seven.

"…Yoruna Mishigure."

The woman, Yoruna Mishigure, looked at the man who had spoken her name.

Her blue eyes were met by the fake emperor—Vincent, to distinguish him from Abel—who stood on the wooden floor.

"No surprise, but it is the same voice, too…"

The voice was exactly the same as Abel's. Apparently, it was not just a similarity in appearance but in voice as well. The double was supposed to take his form, so it was natural to copy his voice, too, and not too surprising.

More importantly, sensing that things were starting to move, the thing he should be focusing on was elsewhere.

"…What was your goal?"

Why had he come to this city? Subaru could not guess why Vincent and his entourage had come. Between running into them and Yoruna's arrival, he had ended up prioritizing just reacting to their presence, but what was Vincent's goal in this? Why stand before a Divine General who had rebelled so many times? Since he had to faithfully play the part of the true emperor, there had to be some justification. And why had Yoruna allowed the emperor, with whom she presumably had bad relations, into her castle?

Maybe she simply was in a position where she could not refuse, but……

"My, my, Your Highness. It has been so long."

As Subaru struggled to understand, Yoruna's eyes smiled, and she put the pipe in her mouth. Exhaling purple smoke, she rudely winked.

"It is an honor to be in your presence. No matter how many invitations I sent, you never paid the Demon City a visit."

"Invitations, you say?"

Vincent furrowed his brow in annoyance, not touching on the twin disrespects of her behavior and the smoke. Crossing his slender arms, he tapped his elbow, as if in thought.

"By 'invitation,' do you mean the soldiers you have so frequently raised against us? If so, our reply should have been quite visible."

"Yes, indeed. However, my head is still attached to my body. And you do not seem to have brought that troublesome brat today, either."

"_____"

"My heart is racing at the thought that my feelings might finally reach you. Please, forgive me."

Yoruna giggled softly. But Vincent showed no sign of wavering in the slightest at her alluring voice and smile.

Subaru was impressed at the level of detail mustered by Vincent the fake emperor, but Yoruna's attitude—the passion in her gaze and words directed at Vincent—was bothering him.

It was a brief exchange, but to Subaru's eyes, they seemed—

"Don't tell me that this lady rebelled because she wanted to get Abel's attention?"

"…I sincerely hope you are wrong."

Subaru gritted his teeth. Al had apparently reached the same conclusion as he had.

He did not want one of the strongest powers in the empire to have raised an army for personal feelings, and he found it hard to imagine anyone having feelings like that

for Abel, a man so disdainful.

That was the main reason Subaru's cheeks tensed, but there was another, more acute reason, too: the problem Medium had brought up earlier. The reason for their visit to try to get Yoruna's attention, the plan formed under the operation name "FU Abel." If Subaru's and Al's troubling premonitions were correct, then it would be a discussion that was very uninteresting to Yoruna. And yet she had invited them into the castle. And in a way that had placed them before none other than Vincent and his guards.

"General First-Class Yoruna, your posture is simply too disrespectful, is it not? What are you thinking?"

"Hmm?"

While they were left to worry about the situation they had been placed in, the fake emperor's group was continuing their conversation. In Vincent's stead, a man with yellow-green hair who appeared to be one of his guards angrily addressed Yoruna. He had short, bristled hair with one lock grown long, like a feeler, and he looked to be around the same age as Vincent, or maybe slightly older. He wore a sand-colored mantle atop light black armor. His face and body gave a sharp, wiry impression as he stared Yoruna down with a prickly glare.

"His Highness's attendant…"

"Kafma Irulux. I was ordered to accompany His Highness on this day. I am aware my role is simply as a guard. However…your behavior is intolerable."

"My behavior? Whatever do you mean?"

"All of it!"

The man who called himself Kafma erupted at Yoruna's easygoing response. Glaring at her, he pointed at Subaru and company, who were watching the exchange in silence.

"Why did you allow the attendance of others in this place?! This is your castle, but it is also one domain of many that belongs to the empire… Have you forgotten even that?!"

“Of course not. I belong to His Highness, as is proper.”

“That is not what I am talking about! And you there!”

“Huh?! Us?!”

Suddenly exposed to Kafma’s anger, Subaru wavered. If possible, he would have liked to just be ignored, but since that was out of the question, he carefully observed the mood of the room.

“Umm, are we perchance interrupting? If so, we could come back another day…”

“That would be troubling. I have only so much time in a day, so I do not know when the next chance would present itself if you missed today.”

“Don’t stop them! They’re clearly uncomfortable!”

“Yes, that much is apparent.”

Subaru was in agreement with Kafma on the question of what Yoruna meant by keeping them there. Since he was accompanying the fake emperor, he was effectively an enemy, but in this one moment, his comment was so reasonable, he seemed an ally.

However…

“Yoruna Mishigure, what are you thinking?”

Suddenly, Vincent Volakia, the false emperor himself, spoke up. The moment he began, Kafma immediately withdrew. Even though the voice and face were so familiar, Subaru could feel his insides twisting.

Even knowing it was a fake, the pressure of his presence was real.

“Answer us. What are you thinking?”

Silencing his retainer, Vincent queried Yoruna again. Her eyes narrowed slightly, basking in the vigor underlying the question. Bringing the pipe to her lips, she inhaled a lungful of smoke and exhaled sweetly, stalling her response.

“Of course, I am always thinking of His Highness, Emperor Volakia.”

“_____”

“Ho-ho. Such cold eyes. However, I am confident that not allowing those guests to leave will be of greater delight to Your Highness.”

Giggling slightly, Yoruna gestured with her chin at Subaru’s group. For the first time, Vincent turned his attention to them with interest. From the previous exchange, he judged that this was more than just a mere whim of Yoruna’s.

Subaru cleared his throat politely, prepared to be scolded, and decided to break this terrible flow.

“My humblest apologies, but allow me to ask again. It seems that we are in the wrong place and are party to a conversation which we should not be. If we might leave for the momen—”

“Oh my, such timidity.”

Subaru bowed politely, trying to leave the room, but he was interrupted. Yoruna’s gaze was hidden by a puff of smoke for an instant, but seeing a childlike gleam in it, Subaru grasped the failure of his plan.

If he was going to turn back, he should have made up his mind to do so the moment he saw the other guest’s face. He was now left with no choice but to lament his mistake.

Since…

“I heard from Tanza… You graciously came to invite me to become His Highness’s enemy, did you not?”

She spilled all of their intentions right there in front of everyone.

2

FU Abel.

That was the operation name Subaru had devised for Yoruna Mishigure the Flamboyant.

She had, by all accounts, rebelled against Abel repeatedly, and a person of such upstanding character as

Zikr had branded her a person of devastating inhumanity. If they were trying to get an audience with her, then Subaru's angle was that there was a figure of some influence who wished to speak in private on the subject of rebelling against the current emperor of Volakia.

The premise was they were visiting this castle in possession of a letter from said figure. And it was not a lie, either. The current emperor of Volakia would be the one who had driven Abel out and swindled his name and status. Since the figure of some influence had turned out to be the true emperor who should have been sitting on the throne, they were nothing less than 100 percent honest.

And all they were trying to do was get her to accept the letter from Abel. If necessary, they could spin a few dozen or a few hundred lies to achieve that.

"That is Natsumi Schwartz's stratagem!!!"

He had wanted to be Al or Medium and heap praise on his ingenious scheme, but…

"Insurrectionists who dare defy His Highness?"

The temperature in the room instantly dropped when Yoruna revealed the plot they had openly claimed.

Kafma, the fieriest person in the room moments ago, was now glowing with an animosity verging on a frozen chill. His grim gaze made it clear that Subaru would not be able to retreat now.

A schemer drowning in their own schemes.

I've never felt that phrase more painfully than now.

"But the awkwardness and lack of information-sharing are both Abel's fau—"

"Do not speak. General First-Class Yoruna."

Kafma silenced Subaru, who was cursing Abel for putting him in such an unreasonable situation, and turned his grim gaze on Yoruna.

"You knowingly brought them into the same room as His

Highness? I would like an answer!”

The anger in his raised voice was not directed at Subaru, who was growing more nervous, but at Yoruna, who had arranged this clash. Not because he held her responsible for the plot, though. It was clear that he did not view Subaru and company as a threat. There was a menace in his demeanor, the mark of a truly powerful person, an aura around him that made it impossible to doubt he was accompanying the emperor for a reason.

“Feels like we’re bein’ left outside the tent, even though this is about us. Not sure how to feel about it…,” Al muttered softly.

Indeed, the tense confrontation was continuing entirely without regard to them. Yoruna put the pipe to her lips and exhaled purple smoke.

“What do you mean by ‘knowingly’?”

“You’re shameless…! As His Highness has counseled on many occasions, you truly are dangerous.”

“Don’t repeat such picked-over topics… Or did you somehow not know of my many outrages?”

“*Ngh!*”

A furious vein bulged on Kafma’s head from what could only be interpreted as provocation by Yoruna.

It was strange, but watching their exchange, Subaru felt himself commiserating with Kafma. He had thought himself ready, based on everyone’s evaluation of Yoruna, but her personality was far nastier than he had expected. However, Vincent’s group did not seem intent on dealing with mere rebels who were dropped in their lap, not when they had come for another reason.

The mood here is a little too tense for offering up some rebels to the emperor. And also……

“Nauseating vulgarity, as ever.”

Vincent brushed aside Yoruna’s plan. Yoruna raised her arched eyebrows slightly at his cold response.

“Oh, does it not suit Your Highness?”

“Fool. When it becomes too one-sided, it is no better than sending lambs to the slaughter. Neither we nor the empire at large are so bored as to need mere brutal entertainment.”

It was a calm statement with an undertone of discernible menace. Breezily facing it, Yoruna’s fox ears twitched through her neatly made hair.

Subaru could not guess what sort of emotion that revealed, but Vincent’s thoughts were just as unreadable. Brought face-to-face with rebels—knowing that he was, in fact, a fake made him even harder to read than the real one would have been.

Since they drove him out, they presumably think badly of Abel, but……

“You.”

“Gah!”

Vincent’s black eyes pierced Subaru, who had so rudely been probing his intentions.

Unable to look away, and despite not being properly prepared, Subaru locked eyes with their great enemy.

How was that identical face created?

Just like the genuine article, those sharp black eyes seemed to see through everything. It made Subaru’s heart uneasy…

“If there is something you wish to say to us, then speak.”

“…Those eyes are infuriating.”

“Wh…?!”

“Ah! No, that’s not what I meant! It was just the heat of the moment!”

His pent-up indignation leaked out at the worst possible moment. Kafma was speechless at the utterly unexpected reaction of disparaging the emperor to his face. He clenched his fist as Subaru tried to explain himself in a fluster, but Vincent himself closed one eye, silencing the guard.

What was surprising was that he seemed to be

appraising Subaru with that gaze. It was a gaze of the same sort the real Abel had turned on Subaru in Badheim, in the Shudrak village, and in Guaral's city hall.

"Umm, anyway, we are…"

Al and Medium were holding their breath and watching things unfold from behind him. They were presumably feeling the heat from Subaru's shocking insult, too. The room was chill and tense. Any further gaffe, and everything would shatter.

Maybe it would be better to retract what Yoruna said and play the jester, lightening the mood and using that to get out?

As Subaru made up his mind, his lips started to curl into an ingratiating smile…when he noticed Yoruna's gaze focused on him.

"_____"

Pipe to her lips, she was silently watching Subaru's every move. It was an ambiguous gaze that could be disinterested or very interested. It was like the smoke drifting up in the air, an illusion that disappeared the more you tried to grasp it.

Subaru instinctively felt that this was his only chance to confirm that illusion. Her gaze was on the verge of losing all interest in them, and she was not so capricious as to take an interest in something again after having let it go. There was no recovering her interest if it was lost now.

That would mean they would never be able to get Yoruna Mishigure's cooperation again, shrouding their already difficult path to success in deep shadow.

And so…

"Choose your words carefully. Is there something you would say to us?"

"That's…"

After a period longer than a single beat, Subaru looked up. The false emperor's eyes were narrowed, and Kafma focused on Subaru as well. The tension from Al and

Medium swelled behind him, and Yoruna inhaled a lungful of smoke.

Noticing those changes out of the corner of his eye, Subaru looked straight ahead at Vincent.

“Lady Yoruna is correct. We are declaring war on you.”

Holding a position that could not be surrendered, clinging to a piece that could not be yielded.

Rem waiting for his return in Guaral, Abel back at the inn, and Al and Medium behind him—they all trusted Subaru’s judgment.

Subaru reflected on them, so that he would not misunderstand the weight of their faith and abandon it…

“_____”

Vincent’s eyes shifted slightly at that direct declaration. Seeing that, Subaru could feel his mouth suddenly drying up. Naturally. Since, unlike Abel, who had lost his actual authority, this emperor could wield the full force of the empire as his sword.

In fact, if Vincent had not raised his hand slightly to stop it earlier, Subaru would have been killed in a rage by Kafma for daring to insult the emperor.

But it had not happened. Vincent had not allowed it to happen.

“Ho-ho…”

Looking down at Subaru and Vincent from her seat on high, Yoruna giggled faintly.

Smoke seeped out of the corner of her lips, curled into a knowing smile, and her shoulders shuddered, seemingly genuinely amused. Subaru’s risky declaration had at least served to stave off her boredom.

“Why do you laugh, Yoruna Mishigure?”

“First of all, because this guest did not withdraw. In addition, I thought these three just might be of some danger to Your Highness’s person… What is it?”

“You are a crafty woman who insists on not obeying us, but you know our intent.”

Vincent did not change his expression beneath Yoruna's provocative, flirtatious glance. He turned his eyes to Subaru, who had confirmed his malicious intent.

"This is the land of the swordwolf. That you have designs upon our head can be said to mark you as true Volakians."

"…That is quite generous."

"Hmph."

Abel dismissed Subaru's sarcasm with a snort.

Even down to that reaction, his behavior was a perfect copy of the real thing. *If Abel were here, I could see him reacting the exact same way.*

"But our head is not so cheap as to fall into your hands so easily."

"…Then what do you intend to do with us?"

"That is the question."

Stopping Kafma, who was about to explode, Vincent acknowledged Subaru. However, judging by his next words, there would be no change in the cold gaze directed at those who would be his enemy.

They had earned recognition for their spirit, but there was no reason to be discreet with those who would cause harm.

Subaru's and Vincent's black eyes locked, scorching the air in the room.

"Aaah, I'm such a terrible woman. To see men fighting over me, it evokes such emotion," Yoruna said, letting that comment slip out despite the mood in the room.

"As if this does not involve you…and there are more women there, so it's not even men fighting over you," Kafma corrected her, annoyed.

Yoruna simply giggled tauntingly while Kafma got more and more visibly angry…

"Your Highness! Please give the order!"

"Kafma, you've been a bit too loud lately."

Tired of the deadlock, Kafma pleaded directly with Vincent, but before he could finish, someone other than

Vincent or Yoruna interrupted.

It was one of the three brought along to protect Vincent —

“Pretty much everything goes smoother when His Highness thinks about it than when we do, right? So us chirping up and causing a ruckus is just a distraction, if you get right down to it.”

It was a wrinkled old man with bushy white hair and eyebrows. In tone and words, he sounded like a little old man with a scrupulously crafted desire not to have to make an effort. He made such a vivid impression that Subaru was not sure why he had not noticed him.

No, I did see him. But I didn’t notice *him*.

Most likely, he had erased his presence in the realest sense.

“But it is the duty of loyal retainers to deal with annoyances for His Highness, Old Man Orbart!”

“Calling yourself a loyal retainer… Don’t you think that sounds like the first step down a path where someone ends up getting purged? I don’t want that. Having to take the head of a youngster with a future ahead of them.”

Old Man Orbart, as he was called, shook his head slowly and twisted a finger inside his ear. As proof of how much pressure that simple gesture held, Kafma’s cheeks tensed. But he was not the only one. Subaru tensed as well upon hearing that name.

“Old Man Orbart…”

“Oh? That’s me, but you know me? I am a bit well-known, after all.”

“…Yes, I am sure that is so.”

Orbart reacted to Subaru’s quavering voice. If that was his reaction, then there was no mistaking it. Subaru had first heard the name in Guaral’s city hall and again on the road here.

The Nine Divine Generals were inescapable in their path to taking back the empire. Yoruna was one of them, and…

“Vicious Old Man Orbart…!”

“I never really liked that name. It’s practically an insult. Do I look like such a mean old man? Well, would anyone actually be able to say I do to my face? Not likely, ka-ka-ka!”

The old man opened his mouth and laughed heartily, revealing a notably complete set of clean white teeth for someone his age.

But Subaru could not bring himself to laugh. They had come to Chaosflame to negotiate with Yoruna, and yet they had run into the fake emperor, Vincent, and he had Orbart with him.

That implied Orbart had already sided with the fake emperor.

“Arakiya and Chisha, plus Orbart…”

The enemy seemed to be steadily bagging high-ranking targets, which left Subaru at his wit’s end. And it wasn’t just a future problem. Their current situation was quickly looking worse and worse.

Kafma alone would have been too much to handle, but if Orbart joined in, even with planned countermeasures, would it even be possible…?

“Hey, gramps, do you happen to remember me?”

“What was that?”

The voice that filled the tense hall caught Orbart a little unexpectedly. It was Al, leaning forward. Subaru’s eyes widened…

“What are you…? Our every single move is being questioned right now, you know?!”

“Your resolve to keep goin’ in a situation like this is incredible, but it’s not like I have no plan, either. Well, not that I’ve really thought it through, but… Hey, gramps! It’s me! Remember?!”

“This sounds like a phone scam…”

If you think a scheme like that is going to work just because he’s an old man, then you’ve really lost it.

Orbart leaned to the side, humming to himself.

“No, I don’t know any strange people like you. I’m old, but even I wouldn’t forget someone who looks like you. Do we really know each other?”

“I wouldn’t really call us acquaintances, and I wasn’t wearing this when we met before, but I was missing an arm, and we talked a little.”

“A one-armed man who spoke with me…?”

“Ah, right… I was with little Arakiya.”

Lowering his voice slightly, Al raised the specter of a Divine General like Orbart—the fearsome girl who had ravaged them in Guaral.

Subaru had no idea what Al was talking about, but upon hearing that, Orbart suddenly furrowed his brow.

“Ohhh! That was you! The one who took back the island with Araki! Now that you mention it, you do resemble him. Ga-ha-ha, so you were still alive!”

“Yeah, I am. The stars somehow lined up for me.”

“And for whatever reason, you came back as an enemy to His Highness? Maybe I shoulda talked you up more to improve His Highness’s appraisal. My bad.”

Orbart was laughing easily, and Al was responding lightheartedly with him. Not knowing their shared past, Subaru could only watch in bewilderment. He could not even tell whether this was a good development or not.

“…Orbart, is he someone you know?”

Marking a period on that topic, Vincent addressed Orbart.

“Yes, that’s right,” Orbart answered. “Two or three years ago, right after you took the throne, there were rebellions happening all over, right?”

“Old Man Orbart, it has already been eight years since His Highness took the throne…”

“Really? It wasn’t just a few years ago? Whoa, the past decade all feels the same to me, so I guess I just slipped up.”

“Continue. What happened eight years ago?”

Vincent dragged Orbart back to the topic.

“Anyway.” Orbart pointed to Al. “There was a rebellion at Ginonhive……and the ones who stopped it were Araki and that guy in the helmet.”

“Ho-ho.”

Hearing that, Vincent looked at Al with some interest for the first time. It was hard to say if it was good or bad, but it did not seem like it would lead to an immediate execution, at least.

Al stepped forward, next to Subaru.

“Though it is rude, if I may speak, as Old Man Orbart

there knows…I was of service to Your Highness eight years ago, and I have not received any reward.”

“Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t need one?”

“Silence, Orbart. Continue, jester.”

“I was thinking I’d like to receive that reward today.”

Subaru could swear he heard the air in the room freezing over.

Al was boldly demanding a reward for his achievements eight years after the fact. There was definitely some value in gambling on his brazenness and that fateful happenstance.

The fake emperor had not immediately ordered their execution when Subaru had made his declaration of war—that meant this Vincent had a reason to act as the emperor would and the resolve to follow through.

And if Al’s words were true, that would fit Abel’s perspective on people getting their just deserts.

So…

“What do you ask? Our head?”

“If I asked for it and you actually gave it, that’d be a huge upset for me, but it takes some courage to actually say you want that. So…”

Al turned just his head, glancing at Subaru. Guessing the meaning of that, Subaru reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter—the reason they had come to this castle in the first place.

“Delivering this letter to Lady Yoruna is our goal. If you would reward my companion’s efforts, then please allow us that.”

“A letter?”

“A letter of love from our…master to Lady Yoruna.”

He hesitated to say that one word but enjoyed a little internal taunting at the implication he had given it. Hearing the phrase “love letter,” Yoruna giggled from her seat. Apparently, that had gotten her attention.

Vincent’s eyes narrowed, thinking for just a few seconds.

“It was eight years ago, but your deeds on Gladiator Island are most impressive.”

“Oh…”

“If you wish it, then we shall grant a reward. You may deliver that letter to Yoruna Mishigure.”

Vincent nodded toward Yoruna. It took a moment to grasp what he had just said, but realizing that it meant Al’s gamble had paid off, the three of them looked at one another.

Al had been right to go out on a limb with such a risky gamble…

“However…”

“*Agh*…”

Just as they were about to cheer, Vincent continued with a stern voice. Turning around, Subaru saw a deep shadow in the false emperor’s black eyes.

“All we will allow is the delivery of the letter. Do you understand the meaning of that?”

Subaru’s eyes widened, and, gritting his teeth, he immediately turned. He was looking at Yoruna, who was smirking while watching events play out.

Their goal was to simply hand over the letter and receive a reply.

“Supposing we deliver the letter, when might we receive a reply, Lady Yoruna?”

“Well, now…”

Yoruna looked up for a few moments and, turning her pipe over, disposed of the ash in the vase prepared by her attendant.

“I am a woman, after all… I would not want to be seen rushing to open a love letter the moment I received it. So… I will take my time to peruse the letter once my guests have left and then draft a reply.”

“…So you will read it once we leave?”

“I am the master of this city, and I would not lie before my retainers.”

Is the gleam in those blue eyes sincerity or playfulness? Not knowing her at all, Subaru had no way to judge, but there were no more options available to him, either.

If they tried to change the nature of Al's reward to be safe passage out of this castle, then Vincent might well have allowed it. However, as before, that would mean severing all possibility of joining hands with Yoruna.

Meaning—

"Al, Medium."

Before making up his mind, Subaru addressed the other two members of his party. He would need their cooperation in what was about to happen, so before it started, he had to get their approval.

As he turned to look at them, Al and Medium both nodded.

"Well, I'm the one who said I'd lend you some strength, Bro."

"Big Bro asked me to take care of you, Natsumi!"

Al cocked his head, and Medium answered enthusiastically. Encouraged by their responses, Subaru nodded back at them and slowly stepped forward to the front of the room—toward Yoruna, sitting in the high seat, leaning against the armrest, smoking her pipe.

Approaching that devilish beauty, catching a whiff of a sweet aroma, Subaru held out the letter.

"Please accept this letter from our master."

"Thank you for your efforts. Though it will be harder from here."

"Yes, I am aware."

Taking the letter with lissome fingers, she commented on what lay in store for them with a smile. But Subaru accepted it with a gallant and dignified bearing. And then—

"—Your Highness, with all due respect, we will be taking your throne."

—he made a far more explicit declaration of war than before.

3

The next instant, Subaru saw an extreme reaction.

“How dare you, insolent cur—?!!!”

Kafma Irulux’s eyes flared. Hearing Subaru’s rude and insolent declaration, Kafma reacted at once, determined to prove his loyalty to the emperor through his strength.

As a result of him stretching out his arms, his shirt burst, and countless thorns bore down on Subaru.

The verdant green briars snaked toward Subaru, filling his vision with an overwhelming wave of foliage. Each thorny tendril was as thick as Subaru’s arm, ready to strangle their prey and wring every drop of life from them.

It was an attack that did not allow Subaru any time to react. The thorns barreled down like a snake easily swallowing a mouse whole.

“Nice one, Bro.”

He braced himself for the gruesome pain of thorns impaling him, but what assaulted his body was not pain but the impact of being pulled backward to the ground as Al stepped in front of him and stopped the briar with his sword.

Standing between Subaru and the danger, Al parried the enemy’s attacks with his thick, broad sword. He could not block everything, though, and his shoulder and sides were oozing blood. Even so, he protected Subaru from that overwhelming amount of thorns.

“Whoa, Medium?!”

“*Ooowaah!* That was dangerous! I’d have died if I didn’t do what Al said!”

Spinning around, Medium answered from right beside him, her twin blades already drawn. Looking closer, he saw her holding one blade high and the other low, cutting parts of the tendrils closing in, or else blocking them, stomping on them, or parrying them.

Subaru was relieved both by her obvious skill and the

fact that she was safe. But it was too soon to breathe easy. Since this was just the first wave…

“What gaudy magic.”

“*Ngh!*”

Behind them was Yoruna, who had surely been in the line of fire of that blast of thorns, too. Still with her arms outstretched from accepting the letter, she pulled her *kamuro* into her embrace and exhaled purple smoke. There were traces of thorns that had hurtled toward her, but she had evaded them, and they seemed to be unnaturally curling, as if there was a round barrier protecting her.

Was that because of Kafma’s control or because she did something…?

“Our humblest apologies for the disturbance. We shall take our leave now.”

“Be careful in your travels. Should you fail to leave the castle…”

“The letter will not be read. Yes, I understand.”

Broken down even further, no matter how bad someone was at grasping things, they would be able to understand Yoruna’s meaning. So with this match that Vincent had allowed to be made so explicit……

“It’s a race to get out of the castle. Al, Medium!”

“Got it!” “Aye-aye!”

“Right!!!!”

Subaru shouted right after receiving their hearty responses. Hearing it, they understood what he meant and swung all three of their swords. The one-armed liuyedao and graceful twin blades tore into the furious thorns, bursting through the wall blocking their vision and path, and they leaped through the opening in the green barrier.

“Do you think you can escape?!!”

But as Subaru took the first step, a needle as thick as his thumb scratched his nose. Different from the thorns, it looked for a moment like a white bone fragment. It was not a warning shot, though. It had been intended to pierce

straight through his temple. If Al had not immediately put his blade in the path of the onrushing needle, Subaru would have died.

“Thorns and needles—is he a magician?!”

“He’s one of the insect-keeper tribe! They keep insects inside their bodies and use them to attack!”

“This really is a trade fair of surprising people!”

With a pointless exchange, Subaru crouched, advancing with support from Al and Medium. Not toward the exit on the other side of the room, though.

If they politely followed standard protocol, they would just be caught in a hornet’s nest of attacks from Kafma. They needed a shortcut.

And so…

“Medium!”

“Aye!”

“Do your best!”

“I will!”

The instant she heard that cheer, Medium’s body accelerated, picking up momentum. Her long hair fluttered as she swung the swords in both her hands, grappling with the vines rushing at them from complex and difficult-to-read arcs. It was, of course, a demonstration of Medium’s own skill, but also…

“Right knee! Nape! Sexy hip!”

“*Ugh! Taa! Oryah!*”

Al’s ragged shouts were informing Medium what part of her was in danger. Medium immediately reacted and prevented the sting of the thorny vines at the last moment time and time again, successfully defending herself.

How far can he see? Al’s incredible survivability had been on display in the fight against Arakiya, too. But apparently, he could wield that vision not just for himself but for someone else, too.

Relying on that aid, Medium barreled toward the edge of the room. Breaking the wooden fence with one slash, her

long leg swung up, kicking through the wall.

As she looked down, she saw there were more than thirty yards between them and the ground. The blue sky of the city and a strong wind greeted them.

This isn't just sink or swim, but……

"If we can get out of the castle!"

Yoruna would pick up the letter.

Having accepted that condition, Vincent's group should stay their hand. *Probably. I think. Though that promise probably wasn't stipulated explicitly.*

But with nothing else to trust in, that was the only—

"—Natsumi!"

Subaru sprinted when Medium called out after breaking the wall.

I was right not to wear a skirt to this. I came this close to dying because of cross-dressing.

Forgetting to make a face in the final moments, Subaru kicked off as forcefully as he could, as if trying to step through the wooden floor. Following her through the wall…

"Sorry, but I can't just not do my job here, either."

"Gah…"

The next instant, the ancient man descended right in front of Subaru and Medium, and his spear hand pierced both of their chests. Rocked by the impact, Subaru had the wind knocked out of him. He felt his focus cracking, like everything else would shatter and crumble, too, after taking an attack from a Divine General.

However…

"Natsumi! It's nothing!"

"Eh?!"

Hearing the loud voice right beside him, Subaru regained the consciousness he had almost lost. Looking down in a panic, he saw there was no damage where Orbart's strike had landed.

He was not bleeding, and there was no sign of the strike piercing through his heart without even drawing blood,

either.

“Now, Natsumi! Don’t bite your tongue!”

Grabbing Subaru by the collar, Medium stepped over the broken wall with her long legs, and then, without any hesitation, she leaped out of the castle—and started falling.

“*Uukyaaaaaa!*”

Screaming, Subaru pulled Medium’s body close and reached for the familiar tool hanging at his hip. A second later, he swung the whip in midair.

It was not as if he had many opportunities prepared, but provoking Yoruna’s interest, and making that declaration to Vincent, and even the exchanges with Kafma and Orbart were all a series of gambles.

They had all just barely managed to make it out, so all he could do was pray that the last step would be successful…

“Come ooooooon!!!!”

Wrapping his other arm around Medium’s slender waist, Subaru sent the whip flying, not toward the open air, but toward one of the many footings that stretched across the top of the city—the spiderweb-like constructions that even reached the outer walls of the Crimson Lazuli Palace. Hooking his whip on one and using it as a stepping stone to get out of the palace’s grounds was what little of a plan Subaru could think of in the chaos.

“*Ngh!*”

Feeling a tug at his arm, Subaru wrapped the whip around his wrist and arm as best he could, so that even if his grip was not strong enough, he would still be able to support their weight at the cost of a broken wrist.

All that was left was…

“Al…*gyah?!*”

“Sorry!”

The instant the whip tightened, Al slammed violently into Subaru’s back. Apparently, he had leaped out of the castle’s wall just like them. They clung to one another, a tangle of bodies weighing over four hundred pounds that was only

being supported by Subaru's one arm.

"*Gaaaah!*"

His arm and wrist, elbow and shoulder—every part of his right arm was screaming in pain as they arced through the air and out of the castle.

The best case would be to wait for the swinging to stop and climb up the whip one by one, but weighing how long that would take and the complete dissolving of his right arm that would happen, Subaru gritted his teeth.

""Aaah.""

The moment he mustered all of his strength, Al and Medium both made a sound. Before he could check what it was, Subaru could feel the sudden disappearance of the burden on his arm. Or more accurately, the burden had not disappeared, but the foothold the whip had latched on to had given out.

Because of the heavy load of briars stretching from the hole in the wall of the tower—

"*Uwaaaaaaaaah?!*"

With an extended scream, the three of them danced through the air. Still under the influence of the momentum from latching on to the footing, they flew through a ballistic path.

It was better than just falling from the tower, but if they hit the ground from more than twenty yards up, there was still no saving Subaru and Al, with their normal, squishy bodies.

With a shrill scream, Subaru searched for some sort of way out, images of Emilia, Beatrice, and Rem flashing through his head.

“_____”

Slamming into a roof with a loud crash, the three of them ended up crashing into a bundle of hay in a stable outside the castle.

4

Kafma’s lips curled in fury as he peered out from the large hole in the wall.

A cloud of dust scattered in the wind below as he scrutinized the building the three of them had disappeared into.

He could not see any trace of the escapees.

“_____”

The cracked foothold collapsed with an audible crash, but it was too far away to hope the pieces of it would crush those insolent interlopers.

However…

“Do you think I will let you escape?! Such insolence must be atoned for—”

“Oy, hold on now. They got out usin’ every card they had, didn’t they? It ain’t right if we disrespect that.”

“Old Man Orbart!”

Kafma’s teeth ground as he spun around, stopped in his tracks from pursuing them. The little old man shuddered beneath his gaze.

“Oooh, scary.”

“And why did you allow them to escape?! You should have been able to capture them in an instant!”

“The same could be said of you, don’t you think? And it’s not like I was holdin’ back. That youngster in the helmet used some strange sort of trick.”

“…He did not seem young enough to be called a youngster.”

“Leave it. Most everyone looks like a toddler waddlin’

around to me, to be honest. I've been an old man since before you were born."

Orbart pointed to himself, his wrinkled face twisted into a smile. Kafma started to comment again on that flippant attitude, but before he could—

"And also," Orbart continued, "you may have forgotten, but I have to watch that fox-girl over there, too, right? Who knows when she might turn her fangs on His Highness, after all."

"General First-Class Yoruna…true. I was thoughtless."

"Ka-ka-ka! As long as you get it."

Kafma slumped, seemingly embarrassed at letting his anger get to his head. Yoruna put her hand to her mouth at being treated like a dangerous threat.

"Such a difficult subject to address. Treating a frail woman like myself as some dangerous beast… I've never experienced such disgrace."

"In what world……?!"

Kafma angrily glared at Yoruna's tearful banter, but she just giggled and lowered the hand covering her lips. Bringing the pipe to her mouth, she inhaled deeply and exhaled a big puff of smoke. The smoke slowly drifted toward the hole in the wall. And when it reached it, there was a shocking change. Almost like an illusion, the broken wall gradually repaired itself.

The fragments of wood that had formed the wall where the hole now stood writhed like a living creature healing itself. It was an odd sight, both a repair of the building and like the birth of some inorganic creature.

"There, now it is as it should be…if you might repair your temper as well."

"…So this is…"

"The reason why we cannot act recklessly in the Demon City…though the danger she poses is not simply limited to that."

Kafma gulped and shuddered, seeing Yoruna smile

politely once the repair was complete. Vincent elaborated, having not moved in the slightest during all of the commotion. The man who held the heights of the empire glanced at the wall and then focused his attention on Yoruna.

“They have left the castle, meeting the conditions we set.”

“So they have. In which case, to renege after their efforts would be bad for my reputation. I am sure you understand, Your Highness.”

“_____”

“Of course, I will respect your thoughts. However, do not forget—”

Looking at the silent emperor, the master of the Demon City, who made no effort to adjust her demeanor toward him, smiled. “This is the Demon City. My city. Even that blue brat’s sword cannot reach me.”

That declaration befitted the master of the city, though it was not an appropriate thing to say to the emperor’s face.

Acting as if her authority, even just over a single city, surpassed that of the emperor himself, who ruled over the entire country, was far more than mere insolence.

However, there was no denial forthcoming. It was an acknowledgment that, regardless of the righteousness of her claim, the truth was uncontested.

Yoruna Mishigure held absolute power in the Demon City of Chaosflame.

And so…

“We will allow one night.”

Anyone who would interpret that as the Volakian emperor’s defeat did not grasp his deeper vision and insight. Though, even for those who served him closest, grasping what was weighed in the balance behind those black eyes was no simple feat.

They simply trusted that Vincent’s words were not illogical.

“I am grateful. In which case, I should like some time to consider a response to the letter.”

Her words were solicitous, but her attitude and expression revealed no such modesty as she asked for Vincent’s permission.

If Vincent acknowledged it, there would be no more returning to this topic.

“Nonetheless, your attitude is intolerable. Please do not make me repeat myself.”

“Ho-ho. Even I cannot help but shudder beneath such fearsome eyes. Could you please do something about him, Old Man Orbart?”

“You’re tossing it in my lap? I’m just a tiny, withered old man; being gentle’s a job for younger folks. Oh, did I just find the ultimate logic to nab nice treatment from most people? My time is coming.”

“Old Man Orbart!”

Kafma angrily raised his voice at Orbart’s jest. Yoruna watched with a smile as the smoke rose, swaying from her pipe. Eyes narrowing as he observed his generals, Vincent snorted softly.

And then, turning, he looked at the final person accompanying him—unlike Kafma or Orbart, he had moved even less than Vincent throughout it all.

“You have been oddly quiet.”

“…Indeed. But there was one there who would make things complicated if we met.”

The voice of a young man answered with a wry smile. He was wearing a snug blue robe over his head, keeping his face covered. That much was normal, but the robe was closed more tightly at the collar than usual, and apparently, he had some connection with the other set of guests in the room. The sort of acquaintance he did not wish to meet again.

“Bokaa, this Demon City is the means. That is what the stars desire, too, it seems.”

“The stars. Nonsense.”

“‘Nonsense’ is too much, Your Highness.”

The man grimaced at Vincent’s high-handed rejection and continued.

“If Your Highness were truly making light of the stars’ wishes, then you would not have brought yourself all the way to this place, Bokaa.”

“Imbecile. You would speak as if you know our thoughts?”

“I would never presume to do so, Your Highness.”

Crossing his arms, Vincent shifted his tone down a level. The man curled his shoulders.

And then Vincent looked away from him—from the Stargazer—his eyes narrowing as he looked into the sky where the three rebels had disappeared, past the wall that had already resealed.

“The wishes of the stars. What drivel.”

He murmured inaudibly under his breath.

5

“*Gah! Gagh! Uuugh!*”

Subaru coughed loudly in the thick cloud of dust, trying to get his lungs to work again. His back and legs ached painfully, but miraculously, he seemed to have escaped any major injury. Looking at the disaster scene of broken pieces of building and footing scattered all around, he realized just how lucky they had been.

“Not that this is the time to be discussing that… Medium! Al!”

“I-I’m here…owie.”

Turning, he called out to the others. There was a response from the rubble right next to him, which he quickly pushed aside to pull Medium out.

She started coughing and blinking.

“Uwaaah, I thought I was gonna die there! Are you all right, Natsumi?”

“I seem to have been lucky, thanks to you and Al protecting me… Are you injured? Do you hurt anywhere?”

“Uh-ha-ha-ha, that tickles! I’m fine, I’m fine! I’m all right!”

As Subaru checked Medium’s shoulders and back, she twisted and pushed him back. She was apparently fine and not just lying or acting tough. *We both were blessed with some incredible good luck there, but……*

“Al…”

Al had not responded, so Subaru glanced around their surroundings, looking for him. As the dust finally settled, he could see they had fallen into an empty stable. The building had been behind the palace, a storage for fodder for gale steeds, by all appearances.

The hay had cushioned their fall, sparing them from a cruel death.

“There! Al!”

Looking around the dark stable together with Subaru, Medium shouted. She was pointing at a wagon that had flipped over in the impact of their fall. The two of them rescued the person squirming underneath it in the hay scattered all around the floor of the stable. Finally, they pulled a thick arm up and out from beneath the hay.

“Owww! You’re gonna take my other arm, too!”

“That is not funny!”

“But he’s alive! That’s incredible!”

Though he scolded Al for that inappropriate joke, he was just as relieved as Medium.

Al was in terrible shape when they got him out of the mound of hay. Subaru and Medium had miraculously managed to escape with just a few scratches and bruises, but there were cuts and black-and-blue welts all over Al’s body.

When he had leaped out after the two of them, he made

for a perfect target for Kafma's thorns and Orbart's attacks.

Every wound he had taken was one that should have fallen on the two of them.

"Hey, why so blue, Bro?"

"That's…"

"Don't look like that; I don't have scars on my back. A swordsman's shame, ain't it?"

Rolling his shoulders reluctantly, Al joked to cheer Subaru up. Subaru caught his breath and then quickly nodded.

"That's true."

Al acted carefree, as if everything were someone else's issue, but all of his hard work during this exchange had been because of his sincerity toward Subaru. He had promised to share Subaru's goal and lend him support. Because of that, he had even risked his life fighting together. That was the sort of man Al was.

"…I misunderstood you."

"Huh?"

"I thought you were unserious, aloof, and not worth relying on."

"Hey now."

"But you risked your life for me. I will not forget that."

Putting his hand to his false breast, Subaru declared his real determination.

The Subaru Natsuki right now, in this moment, would not exist were it not for him, so he would continue fighting, never forgetting the debt he owed.

Even if my life ends in this next moment…

"Natsumi, Al, if you get too flustered…"

"Yes, I know. We cannot let Al's sacrifice go to waste."

"I'm still here, you know?!"

Subaru wiped his face with his sleeve and nodded firmly at Medium's warning.

They had avoided falling to their deaths, but they could

not relax yet. They could claim to have met Yoruna's and Vincent's requirements, but there was no guarantee that would be enough to stay Kafma's or Orbart's hands.

Subaru lent Al a shoulder to lean on, and they started to leave…

"We should leave at once, find a place to hide, and wait for her—"

"—That concern is unnecessary."

"Wha?!"

…when a different voice addressed them.

He let go of Al in shock, who toppled over with a groan. But Subaru did not have the presence of mind to worry about him. He had to face the figure standing at the entrance of the stable, watching them.

"You are…?"

"Forgive my tardy introduction. I am Lady Yoruna Mishigure's attendant, Tanza."

The deer-girl who was at Yoruna's side bowed politely. Calling herself "Tanza," she slowly raised her head and shook it when Medium stepped forward to protect Subaru and Al.

"You need not be wary. I have no intention of causing you any harm."

"Really? But we broke a big hole in the wall of the castle here."

"Lady Yoruna will repair the castle and stable. You have been acknowledged as official messengers by Lady Yoruna. You will not be accosted by anyone from here on."

In addition to answering Medium's concern, she also added something else. It was enough to get Medium's eyes to soften in relief, but Subaru's impression was the opposite.

Setting aside whether she will fix up the wall and this stable, the bigger thing is the second half.

"That is quite a bold promise. We are aware His Highness the emperor was there, you know."

He could not make much of an impression with Medium covering for him, so Subaru stepped forward next to her. Tanza's ashen eyes observed him. She had an adorable face, but she did not reveal any emotions. As a *kamuro*, she would presumably need some level of charm, but her behavior and presence almost seemed like a puppet's.

"At the very least, we are individuals who dare to wish harm upon…His Highness… Can you promise his attendants will not chase us? Just because Lady Yoruna has kindly deigned to acknowledge us?"

"Yes. Within this city, none may defy Lady Yoruna. That is something Lord Vincent is aware of, too, I believe. So…"

There was a calm but absolute confidence in Tanza's answer. Such confidence blocked out the response Subaru would have had, leaving him dumbfounded. Looking at him, she pointed to the ceiling.

Through the broken ceiling, he could see the imposing structure of the Crimson Lazuli Palace, but she had not meant the palace.

"Those guards will not come… It seems it is safe to take that promise at face value."

"Lord Vincent has left as well. The response to the letter will come tomorrow. Please return to the castle then."

"…Understood."

"Then please be careful in your travels."

Tanza bowed and turned away from the three of them.

Leaving after having performed the bare requirements of her task, she would surely head back to Yoruna. But right as she was leaving…

"Tanza," Subaru politely called out to her.

Stopping, she turned, watching with that unmoving, doll-like expression.

"What sort of person is Lady Yoruna, do you think?"

The reason for the question was because Subaru figured out what impression Yoruna had left on him.

Given that she didn't know Vincent was a fake, the way

she had interacted with him should have been the same way she dealt with the real emperor, Abel. Her behavior went beyond a simple lack of courtesy and disrespect. He didn't think it was simply overlooked because she was strong, but whatever the reason, it was unclear why she behaved that way.

Did she feel affection or hostility toward Abel? If they wanted her as an ally, they needed to know. And so…

"I would like to ask you, as someone who is at her side, what is your impression of Lady Yoruna Mishigure?"

"She is a deeply affectionate person. She loves her allies and loathes her enemies. A lover of all who live within the Demon City's walls."

For the first time, there was a flicker of emotion in Tanza's eyes when she answered without hesitation.

It was brief enough to disappear in the blink of an eye, but to Subaru, it looked like a faint passion. But it was not followed by any further words. He could only watch as she left without saying any more.

"_____"

If you asked me whether I got what I wanted out of that, then the answer is no.

It just made Yoruna seem even harder to understand. Tanza's words rang true, but it was hard to put much confidence in a description that rated Yoruna as deeply affectionate.

In the end, they had been toyed with and run around from the moment they arrived in this city.

"Sheesh, she left just like that, huh…? So what are we gonna do?"

"…There is nothing to do but return. We can only trust Tanza's message and wait for a reply tomorrow."

Subaru helped Al to his feet and lent him a shoulder again once Tanza had left. Supporting his body weight, Subaru looked back up at the palace.

"A captivating, gaudy castle… Is that also part of the

flamboyance?”

Murmuring that to himself, he understood what Tanza had said to be true. At some point, the large hole they had opened in the side of the tower had, no matter how closely he looked, disappeared without a trace.

6

“I see. So he came.”

“Is there nothing else you have to say? Anything? An ‘I’m sorry,’ perhaps?”

Dragging themselves back to the inn, they provided a detailed report of delivering the letter to Abel. Subaru grimaced at the first words out of his mouth and stomped closer.

But Abel, in his oni mask, just put his palm on Subaru’s head and pushed him back with some annoyance.

“Why should I have to apologize? You all did well. I was just considering complimenting your efforts as a great deed.”

“Compliment this! Compliment that! That condescending phrase! You do not need to compliment it; we just did what needed to be done. Isn’t that right, Al?”

“Why are you dragging me into this? Gimme a break, please.”

Subaru was hoping for support from Al in his fierce counterargument, but Al, who was covered in bandages after Talitta’s first aid, just breezily waved his hand.

Covered in bandages and with a black helmet over his head, he was a truly surreal image.

“But, fortunately, you and Medium are safe. I was worried that I should have come with you.”

“See there? Did you hear that? That’s an appropriate reaction. As emperor, why don’t you learn from Talitta’s example as chief?”

“Please stop. I’m going to die…”

Subaru was trying to explain the way a leader should carry themselves around others and pointing to Talitta as a good example, but the blood drained from her face, and she shook her head. Her gracious response was, unfortunately, vexing for Subaru personally.

Is there no one who can be used to teach Abel a lesson?

He felt pathetic having to rely on other people for examples on this subject, though.

“*Uuu! Auu!*”

“Ah! No, Louis! Natsumi and the others are having a really important conversation!”

A shrill voice from the next room over interrupted Subaru’s thoughts. Looking over, he saw Louis and Medium wrestling through the door to the other room. Of course, Louis could not resist Medium, so it was like a sumo match between a child and an adult. Louis was quickly hoisted in the air and disappeared back into the other room.

“*Aauuu!*”

“Sheesh, what is it? She has been running all around me since we came back.”

“Despite everything, she’s closest to you, is all, Bro. She won’t even give me the time of day. Not like I especially want her to like me, though.”

Al grumbled in his bad Halloween costume as Subaru sighed. Talitta wiped her forehead in satisfaction, but her aesthetic sense was something, too.

I’m sure she would get along with Emilia and Beatrice, and they would have some serious debates about it, too.

As he thought of them, his heart ached painfully. But it was not just them. He also missed everyone on the other side of the border.

It had been about twenty days now since Subaru was sent on his express flight to Volakia. Given that they had Beatrice and Ram, his and Rem’s safety would presumably be noted, but without any other information than that, they

were probably worried.

I want to get on the road to meet up with them again as soon as possible.

"And yet this masked man won't tell me crucial details…"

"Hmph. Calling me a masked man? And what does that make you? A dunce and a jester?"

"We're like a bad Halloween party."

Al hit on the exact same thought Subaru had. Between that and Abel's comment, Subaru grimaced in annoyance.

My cross-dressing is to achieve a practical purpose, so please don't lump us together.

"Anyway! We were able to meet Yoruna in the castle, and the emperor's group as well… Is it correct to assume that was your body double?"

Subaru clapped his hands and forcefully dragged the conversation back on topic.

"Yes." Abel nodded from behind his mask. "There are any number who might resemble my form, but there is only one capable of masquerading as me—Chisha Gold."

"Chisha Gold…one of the Divine Generals, right? The 'White Spider,' was it?"

"Indeed. He is wise and skilled at leading a large army. In addition…"

"He's the first one who betrayed our boy Abel."

Abel nodded at Al's comment. Chisha was the first of the Nine Divine Generals to betray him, and the person whom Abel had trusted the most. It was he who had become Abel—replacing him and seizing the throne.

"Why do you think Chisha…the false emperor…came here?"

"He understands the victory condition for my battle, too."

"So then, they were here to bring Yoruna Mishigure into their camp, too?"

"That is difficult to imagine. He is not so reckless as to think Yoruna Mishigure could be convinced or negotiated

with.”

“What? Then why?”

“It is obvious. Because he has read the map well enough to gather that I would come to the Demon City.”

Subaru had a question mark forming over his head, since he did not grasp the meaning of that answer. Having the same problem, Al raised his hand.

“Are you serious, saying that fake emperor predicted that you’d come to Chaosflame? If you are, isn’t that kinda crazy?”

“He can follow my thought patterns with unerring precision. And the flow of events from my leaving the palace to the fall of Guaral, combined with the distribution of the Nine Divine Generals… It is simple to recognize the Demon City would be a key point.”

“Knowing that, you…no…you couldn’t possibly!”

Tracking Abel’s calmly reasoned answer, Subaru widened his eyes.

“You knew that we would run into the fake emperor? And then stayed behind in the inn to avoid encountering him yourself…?”

“Fool. What would be the meaning of such an action? Even a winnable game of shatranj can be lost by wastefully sacrificing pieces.”

“…That is…true. However…”

The key sticking point was that Abel did not make moves that were disadvantageous to himself. That was the biggest problem. So long as Subaru could not answer that question, he would have to keep his secret pet theory of Abel’s vicious manipulation just that: a secret pet theory.

Either way…

“In any case! Getting back to the topic at hand, what is going on? The fake emperor knows he can’t get Yoruna as an ally. So why would he appear in the city where he is certain you will come…?”

“To strike preemptively and ruin any chance of

reconciliation between Vincent Volakia and Yoruna Mishigure. Do you think it would be easy for me to ascend the tower of the Crimson Lazuli Palace after he has worked his plan?”

“Ah, that…that’s kind of a cunning move.”

Al nodded, convinced, and Subaru was in silent agreement.

Finally, Subaru was starting to understand Abel’s intent. Meaning the Vincent there was neither Yoruna’s enemy nor her ally. He was only there to muddy the waters.

That was why he had come there himself, to disrupt the negotiations between her and Abel.

“…Then if our arrival had been one day later?”

“His plan would have succeeded. Thus why I attempted to say it before: This was a great deed you performed.”

“_____”

Subaru looked quietly into Abel’s eyes.

Does that mean earlier he was trying to offer a genuine expression of appreciation, in his own way? If so, there should be a limit to how bad a boss can be at complimenting their subordinates.

“Good job, me…and you, too, Al and Medium!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess so. Good job, us.”

“Mhm. That declaration was so cool, Natsumi!”

The three of them, having overcome grave danger together, patted one another on the back and celebrated their comradery. Talitta looked a little lonely at being left out, and unlike with Abel, Subaru did feel sorry for her.

“But there were many things that I wish you would have told us beforehand. For example, that Yoruna has feelings for you that are gentler only than pure hatred.”

“Yeah, that. I was thinking we really should have known that, too. I’m beggin’ ya. I get there’s no helping being born a looker, but you at least gotta pay the hottie tax.”

“I cannot understand a word you are saying, jester. And you misunderstand.”

“Misunderstand? You know we saw how she acted, right?”

It was with a body double, but still, they had seen her interact with Vincent, and she definitely had been making some provocative and alluring eyes at the fake Abel.

Hearing their further arguments, Abel sighed deeply.

“Yoruna Mishigure does not feel anything toward me. She is interested in the emperor.”

“…And that’s you, isn’t it? Don’t tell me you’re going to suddenly confess that you actually are the fake and that one was the real emperor?”

“Fool. Do not take it so literally. It is true that I am the emperor of Volakia, but the emperor of Volakia is not only me. There have been past emperors, and there will be future ones, too.”

Subaru’s eyes widened, and Al made a silly sound, too.

“In other words, Yoruna’s after your money or status or something?”

“I cannot say more, but broadly speaking, your interpretation is not mistaken. What she desires is to stand at the summit of the empire—the position of emperor of Volakia’s favored mistress. The emperor of Volakia need not be me.”

“…That’s…almost sad.”

“Do not pity me over some story you have made up in your head.”

It was, in some sense, a pragmatic sort of love. The favored mistress to the emperor—in other words, becoming the empress consort. With that sort of status, even without being emperor herself, she could achieve enough wealth and authority to dominate the empire.

That beautiful fox’s greed could not be satiated simply by ruling Chaosflame.

“What did you write in that letter, then?” Talitta asked.

“Well, probably a promise to marry her if she joins him or something, right? That’d be the fastest way, at least. And

she is beautiful.”

“She is difficult enough to handle that just being beautiful might not quite make up for it, though, I suppose…”

Even if looks could make up for some level of trouble, there were limits. Priscilla and Yoruna were undeniably beautiful, but Subaru would never want to marry them. No amount of money in the world would be enough for that.

“I have no intention of revealing the contents of the letter, but I will at least guarantee that the response will not betray your expectations.”

“Trust is required for a guarantee to mean anything… On second thought, let’s stop there. Nothing will change by saying it, so just stop it! Stop it!”

Clapping his hands together, Subaru forcibly dropped the subject. Abel looked dissatisfied at a conclusion he was unconvinced by, but Subaru glanced at Al and started a new topic.

“By the way, that Nine Divine General’s name was ‘Orbart,’ right? ‘Vicious Old Man’?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen my share of dangerous ones, but he’s in the top class of dangerous.”

“Do you believe that dangerous old man has already been scouted? If so, then together with Chisha and Arakiya, that would mean three have already been taken.”

They needed to collect a majority of the Nine Divine Generals, so it was naturally terrible news that the other side might already have won over three while they were struggling to get their first.

As it happened, Orbart was Three and Chisha was Four, apparently, so they were already dominating the upper ranks of the generals.

“It is a natural concern, but no. In all likelihood, Orbart is not in their camp. At present, he is just obeying an order from the emperor in his role as one of the Nine.”

“…What evidence do you have for that?”

“Orbart Dankelken is an unreadable man. Arakiya can be moved by sophistry, but it is no mean feat to inveigle Orbart.”

“So then that means the Nine Divine Generals were not fully under your control…?”

In other words, he was saying that his body double would not be able to control someone he could not fully control himself. It was not exactly a cheerful thought and was concerning for what it meant for the future.

“Then there is still a chance for us to make an ally of this Old Man Orbart.”

“Adequate preparation will be necessary to bring him to the table, of course. He is a shrewd one. Once he realizes what is happening, he will weigh both sides in the balance before deciding who to favor.”

“…Oh yeah, he was an acquaintance of yours, right, Al? How did you know each other?”

In terms of negotiating with Orbart, Al seemed the most effective to Subaru. The conversation they’d had in the tower made it sound like there was some chance there.

“Gladiator Island, was it? You served some role in resolving an incident there…?”

“Oh, yeah, right. Though there’s not much more to add to it. Eight years ago, back when I was still a sword slave, I got caught up in a rebellion that happened on the island. A bunch of slaves took a big noble who was there to watch the matches hostage and demanded to be set free.”

“That sounds like quite the big deal to me… And you resolved it…?”

“More precisely, it was me and little Arakiya, back when she was just a little girl. As for the noble who was held hostage… Well, that’s not important.”

It was a bit muddled in the back half of the story as Al scratched his neck awkwardly. Apparently, it was hard to talk about, but even setting aside the hidden details, the gist of it was easy enough to follow. A rebellion on the

island and a reward eight years later. Using that, Al had managed to give them an opening to complete their goal.

Risking his life just for the sake of supporting Subaru, as he had promised.

“To think something like that would pop up in a situation like this. Guess I’m grateful for my younger, apathetic self.”

Al laughed cheerfully so Subaru did not have to work himself up about it. He was grateful for that consideration, just as Abel nodded to himself.

“That?”

Taking hold of the chin of his mask, Abel raised it, revealing his face to Al.

“I heard one of the slaves on the island assisted in the resolution of the incident right after my succession. And that he had not sought a reward… That was you, jester?”

“Seems like it. Though, that word of it reached the emperor, and that you even remember, is kind of scary. I feel like you’ll probably remember all of the jokes I said during the trip, too.”

“That was a great deed. I shall reward you. Name it.”

“…Sure…”

As he revealed his face, Abel’s words were grave, adorned with an immovable earnestness.

His strongly held beliefs made him assume the visage of an emperor once more. Even though the person who had achieved the results did not ask for a reward, Abel’s sense of leadership would not take no for an answer.

I doubt Al’s getting away without taking a reward this time.

“Either way, with the letter delivered, there is nothing to do but wait for a response tomorrow.”

“That…is right. There is nothing more we can do… The girl attending Yoruna did say that the false emperor and his entourage would not be allowed to lay a hand on us.”

“If that is what Yoruna Mishigure said, then there is no doubting it.”

Abel apparently took Tanza's guarantee at face value. It was another thing that Abel had not talked about, but it seemed like there was some factor Subaru and the rest of them did not know about.

"Even if we demanded an explanation…"

"I have the right to decide what information to share. The information you have been given is the information that would not be problematic for you to know. At the very least, for now."

"For now… Huh."

For a brief moment, Subaru's tone shifted back to normal. He admonished himself for letting that discord grow inside him.

It was easy enough to just write Abel off as being uncooperative, but Abel did not wish to fail, either. He was doing the best he could, just like Subaru was.

His method just did not align well with Subaru, who preferred to talk everything through, was all.

"In that case, that's about does it for today, right? Fortunately, everyone survived to see tomorrow, and we even managed to stop the other side's plan, too. Pretty good as things go."

Al spoke up loudly, looking to shatter the awkward mood that had materialized between Subaru and Abel.

Bowing to that consideration, Subaru nodded. "Yes."

There had been plenty of curveballs, but with the help of Al and Medium, he had carried out the first step of the plan to convince Yoruna Mishigure. All that remained was to wait for the results tomorrow.

"…I am truly tired."

Once they reached the conclusion that there was nothing to do now, his body grew heavy. The tension faded, and he started to notice the exhaustion. An appearance at the castle right after a long trip on the road, and then the encounter with the false emperor and his entourage and the meeting with Yoruna had been incredibly taxing.

“Sleepy…but I have to take care of my whip…”

Holding his groggy head, Subaru muttered blankly to himself.

Seeing him, Talitta supported his shoulder.

“Natsumi, you just finished an important job. I will take care of maintaining your weapon, so please get some rest early tonight. I will watch for any raids in the night.”

“Night raids in the middle of a city? What is the world coming to…?”

Smiling a little at Talitta’s show of concern, Subaru decided to take her up on her kind offer. After a deep breath of relief, he headed toward the room assigned to him. But when he did…

“*Uuu!*”

“You again…”

Louis, who should have been in the other room, leaped onto Subaru, as if she had been waiting for him there. Subaru held his head in annoyance as Louis grabbed at his arm.

He would not have minded that desire to play from any child other than Louis, but with her, he could not let his guard down. All the more so when he was already exhausted.

Subaru silently put his finger against her pale forehead and flicked it, driving her back with a groan.

“I am not in a state of mind where I can deal with you right now. Please get out of my way.”

“*Aaa, uaa!*”

“Ah, you got out of bed again! Sorry, Natsumi. C’mon, over here, Louis! Stay with me!”

Medium’s arm stretched out and lifted Louis up while she held her forehead. Louis kept kicking her legs, struggling to cling on to Subaru even as she was carried away.

She disappeared again behind the door to the other room, and this really was the end of Louis’s shenanigans.

“Sheesh, what is with her…?”

“She’s even hotter for you now, Bro. It’s probably, well, you know? That even if she can’t understand what’s going on exactly, she can sense how close to death you were?”

If Al’s observation was true, then that would mean Louis was concerned about him. Acknowledging that was difficult for Subaru on an emotional level, though. Even as Louis was acting like an innocent child, an evil, unforgivable malice lay slumbering deep within her.

That steadfast belief was what underpinned all of Subaru’s interactions with Louis.

“Abel, I will be sleeping in the room. You…”

“It matters not. You would not be much use in an emergency anyway.”

“You stand watch all night. Don’t just leave everything to Talitta.”

Since his response did not merit any concern, Subaru chose to answer it with banter.

He felt a bit bad for Talitta, left awkwardly in the middle, but for now, that was enough satisfaction before resting.

“Wash off the makeup, change some clothes…and sleep like a rock.”

Going back to his room, Subaru shook his head back and forth as he undid his outfit.

So far removed from the Shudrak village, it would not be easy to repair the wig. It needed precise care and maintenance, so he was cautious dealing with it.

Putting it into a fine mesh net, he carefully, gently soaked and swirled it around. Then he washed the clothes and boots he had removed. With the bare level of care handled, Subaru collapsed into bed.

Closing his eyes, he drifted into unconsciousness.

“Tomorrow…”

Things would start to move again. If things moved, then what he could see would change, too. If that changed, then new paths might open. If new paths opened, he could get

closer to his goal. Everyone so far away was there.

“Rem, Beako…Emilia-tan…”

There was an ache in his heart as he whispered their precious names in this foreign land, so far away.

Dreaming of seeing them again, he slipped away into unconsciousness…

7

Slowly, Subaru woke up, opening his eyes as he lay on the bed.

Ordinarily, he did not sleep that well, but he had apparently really been tired yesterday, because he had been able to sleep soundly. Soundly enough that he could not remember dreaming.

That probably did a lot for my physical exhaustion……

“Huh?”

But what had woken him up was not having gotten enough sleep; it was noisy.

There were animated voices outside the door to his bedroom. They had served as an ample alarm and pulled him from his sleep.

This much noise right when I wake up isn’t a great sign.

The morning sun was peeking through the shut curtains, making it clear that it was not exactly early morning. Hearing the boisterous commotion of the Demon City outside, Subaru glanced at the wig that he had left drying in the shade, wondering what to do.

All things considered, he should probably get dressed as Natsumi Schwartz. But if there was a problem outside, there was no time to complete the transformation. Thinking about it, he settled on prioritizing finding out what was going on first, and then deciding. It could just be him jumping to conclusions, after all. If it was really important, Al, Medium, or Talitta—or really, anyone other than Abel—

would have thought to wake him up.

So…

“Agh?!”

As he started to get out of bed, he rolled onto the floor. Sparks flew in his eyes from the impact, while he was taken aback by what had happened. He was not feeling in particularly bad form, and he had not slipped on clothes he had left lying around, either. He had just misjudged the distance and missed the floor with his foot.

His leg did not reach the distance from the bed to the floor.

“That’s not…”

Subaru had a bit of a complex about having shorter legs than average, but even so, it was not enough to make an impact on day-to-day things. Even if his legs were a little shorter, he had lived in his body for eighteen years. That was not the sort of thing he would mess up.

But as he sat up, he realized it.

Everything in the room seemed oddly bigger compared to how it had been last night.

“Hey, c’mon, is this some sort of joke…?”

Grimacing, he heard his voice quaver as he touched his face. Crawling awkwardly, he felt his arms and legs being swallowed up by an airy set of pajamas, his heart racing, and his breathing coming heavily. He picked up the mirror in his bag. He needed it for fixing his makeup and generally dressing himself, but what it revealed—

“What is this…?”

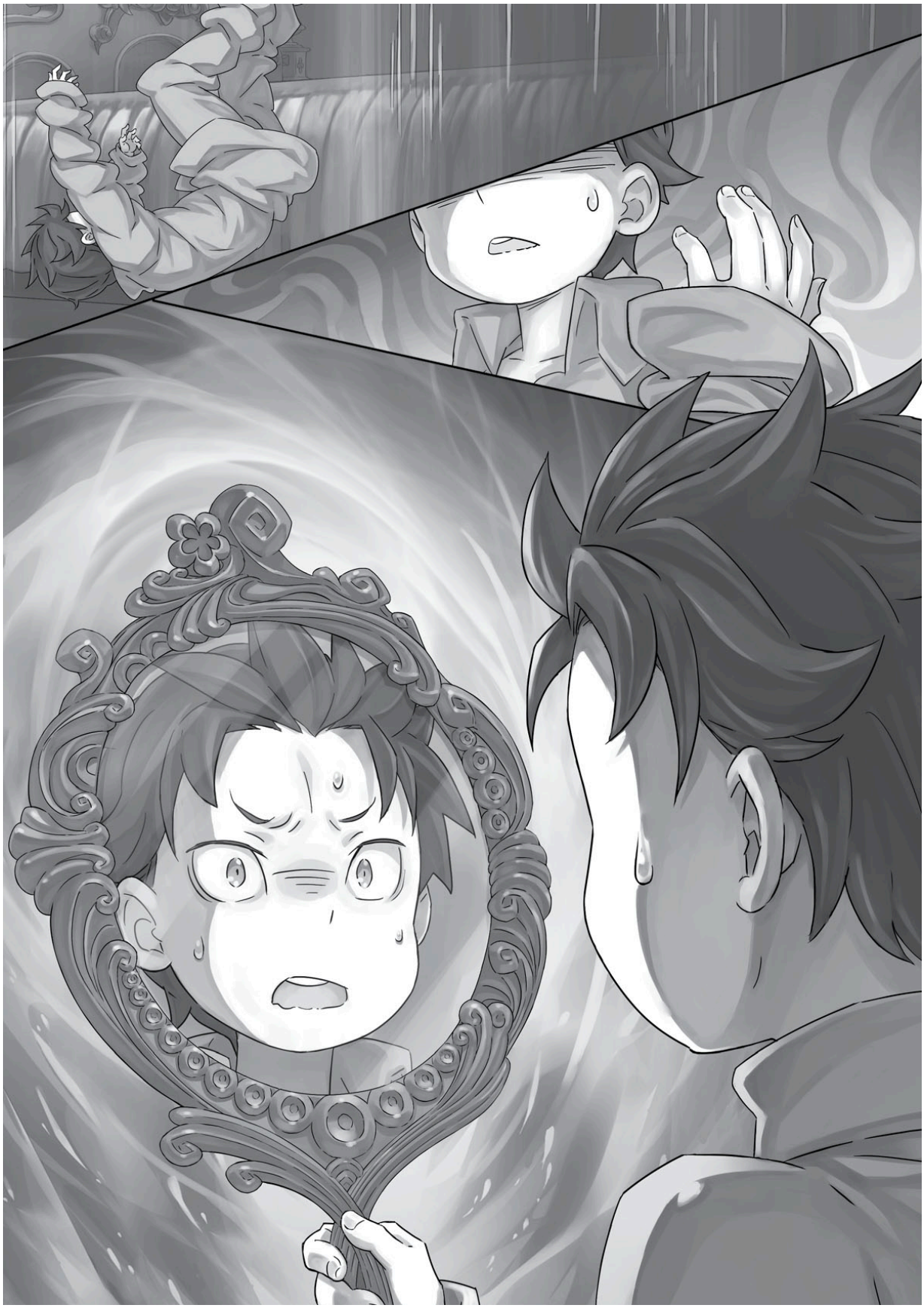
Seeing the reflection in the mirror, he was dumbfounded.

The mirror trembled in his hands, reflecting none other than Subaru Natsuki.

However…

…it was the young boy Subaru, circa age ten.

<END>



AFTERWORD

Hello everyone! Good job! This is Tappei Nagatsuki! And also the mouse-colored cat!

Thank you for joining me for Volume 28 of *Re:Zero*. I just wrote it there like it was nothing special, but twenty-eight is a pretty crazy number. At twenty-eight volumes, lots of famous manga are coming to an end, so for a light novel to still be going is really something.

This is all thanks to the support of normal readers. There is still much more to write, but I earnestly pray you will continue to enjoy the story to the end.

Well, it has been a whole volume without the familiar appearance of the protagonist. I am thinking it might even be iffy whether he shows up in Volume 29, but hopefully you are all looking forward to this seventh arc of the series!

A protagonist's never-ending anxiety, unavoidable tension, unreliable allies, and enemies who might do anything, along with inescapable death. That is the spice of this series, but I imagine those of you who have joined through twenty-eight volumes are well aware by now.

As the author, I intend to diligently keep the protagonist working hard so that thrilling scenes and unexpected developments continue to please! Sincerely!

With the familiar edge of the page looming, allow me to move on to the usual thanks!

Yet again, my editor I helped me with various things in order to move things along, with the end of the year looming. I think it may have been due to the rush involving the illustration book going on sale, but please continue to take good care of me!

I had quite a lot of support from the illustrator Otsuka with all of the new characters and scenes and designing the setting for the Crimson Lazuli Palace in the Demon City! All while dealing with the protagonists' rapid wardrobe changes. Truly, truly thank you!

To the designer Kusano, you did a splendid job of designing a cover a little different than any of the other covers while keeping it recognizably part of the series as a whole. As always, I am much obliged!

In comicalization news, Atori and Aikawa's adaptation of the fourth arc is ongoing in *Gekkan Comic Alive*! The newest volume should be going on sale around the same time as this book, so please check your bookstores. They always set out wonderful displays!

Also, as always, thank you very much to everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial division, the proofreader, and all of the bookstores. This book could only exist thanks to the support of many people.

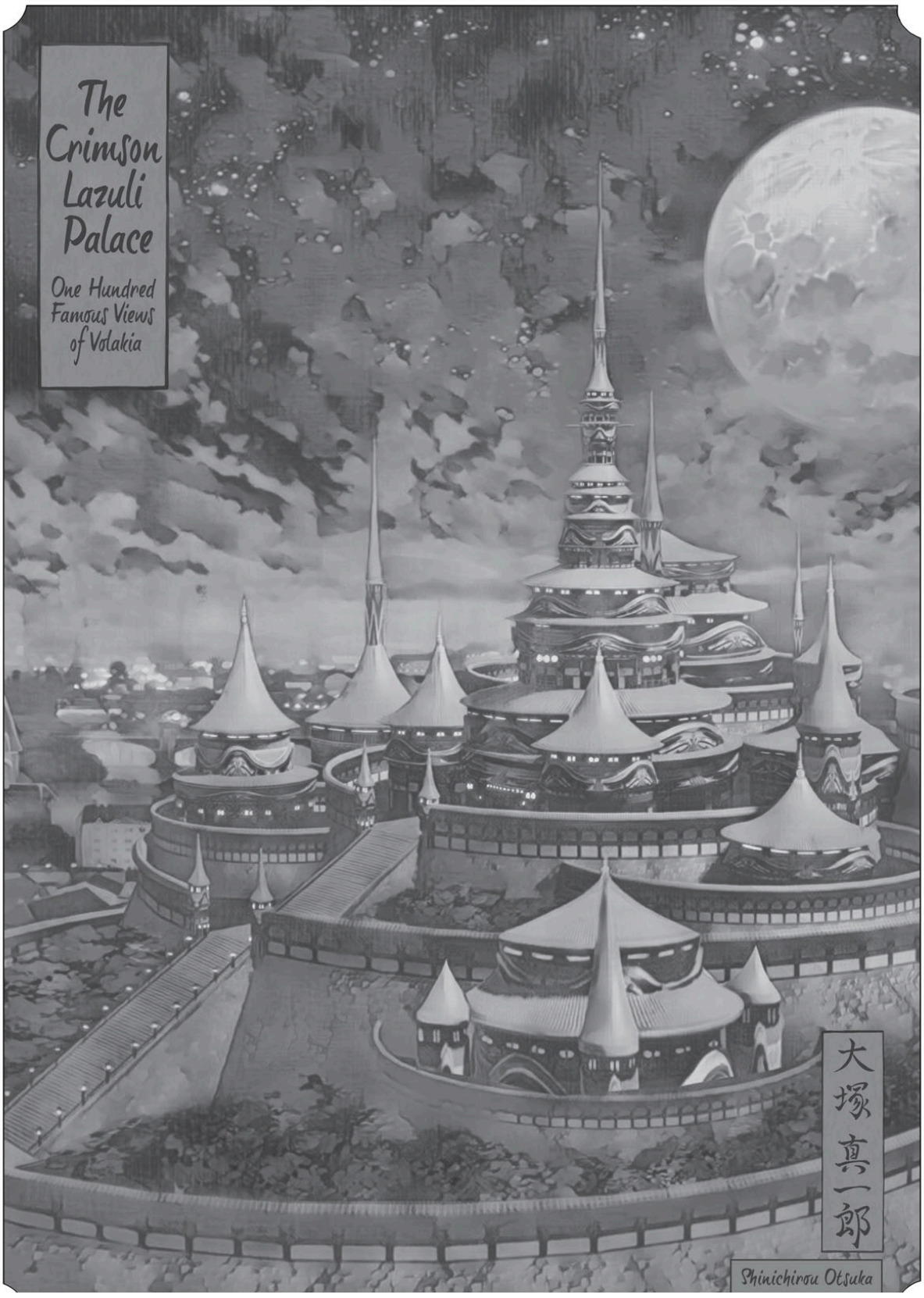
And my greatest thanks again go to you, the readers who continue to support this series!

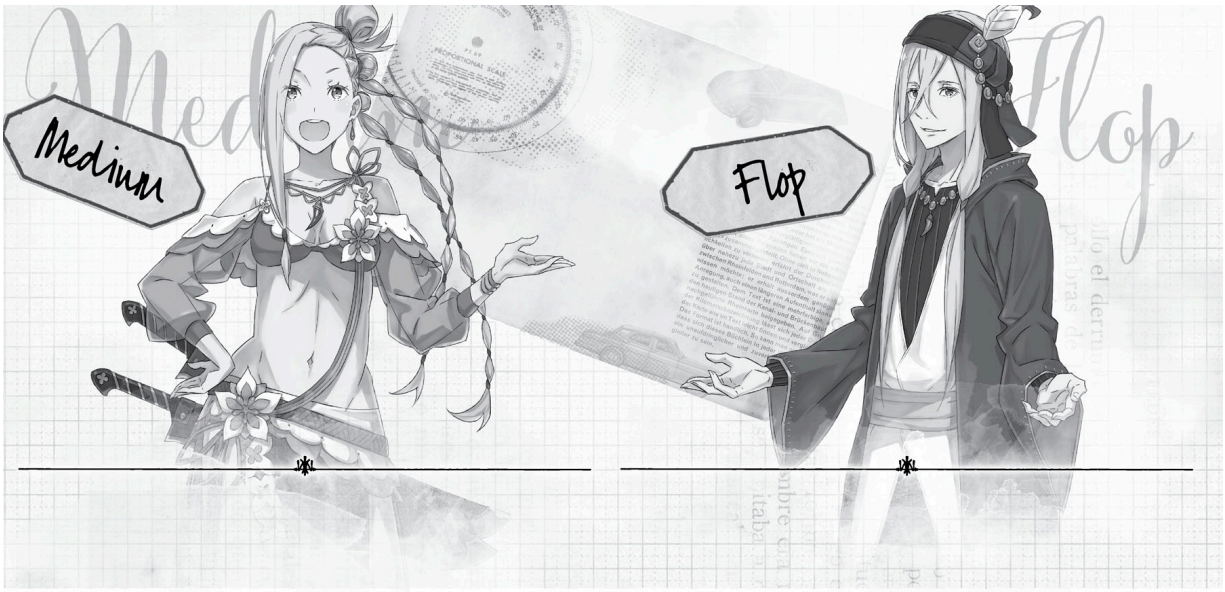
We're on a new stage with new challenges, and I will continue to weave an interesting story, so please stick with me for many years to come!

May we meet again in the next volume! Thank you!

December 2021

<Like every year, stunned by the passage of time, thinking of next year>


The Crimson Lazuli Palace
One Hundred Famous Views of Volakia
大塚真一郎
Shinichirou Otsuka


Medium
Flop

“Well, then! Time for us to take a giant leap and get this show on the road!”

“Wow, Big Bro! I don’t know what to do, but congrats!”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s my sister, always in good spirits! Now then, the chief and the others trusted us with this job, so let’s do this!”

“You mean Natsumi and them? Sounds like we’ll have to really go for it! So what do we do?”

“Looks like…announcements and progress reports! Just the job for traveling merchants like us.”

“Ooooh, I see! But you’re the only one who’s a traveling merchant. My job is just to guard you, so am I going to be useful?”

“Of course! Stand right here next to me and cheer me on!”

“Got it! Do your best, Big Bro! Don’t lose!”

“You can count on me! Now then, the first announcement is a follow-up on the ridiculous situation that has befallen my good ol’ buddy. Find out what happens in Volume 29, planned for March 2022!”

“Ah, that was really, really surprising what happened to Natsumi! But I’m there, too, so I’ll try super hard to support ’em!”

“That’s my sister. Feel free to go on a rampage!”

“So what else, what else?”

“Mmm! The second *Re:Zero* art book with lots and lots of illustrations by Shinichirou Otsuka will be going on sale at the same time as this book!”

“Lots of memories from before Natsumi met us!”

“The book also features tons of comments and an interview with Otsuka, as well as a collection of store-exclusive short stories, so it’s packed with fun stuff!”

“I can’t really tell the difference between good and bad things like you can, but I do think pretty pictures are nice! Can you draw like that, too, Big Bro?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! You make it sound so easy, Medium. These

illustrations are the result of incredible effort and dedicated practice. We should simply praise such beauty. And then…oh?”

“Wait, wait, what’s that? Ah! It’s Rem! And a look-alike?”

“Hmm, this must be the missus’s older sister that my buddy mentioned. Apparently, there is going to be a birthday event for the two of them this year as well!”

“Ah! A birthday! How nice! I want to celebrate, too! What about you, Bro?”

“Of course, I love celebrations! We’ll have to do our best so everyone can enjoy the festivities without regrets!”

“Mhm, mhm! All right, I’m gonna get out there and work, Bro!”

“Sounds good! Get out there and have some fun!”

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